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GUERRILLA WAR

**Soviet
Partisan
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THE FIRST RUSSIAN FRONT OF WWII: 1939–1941

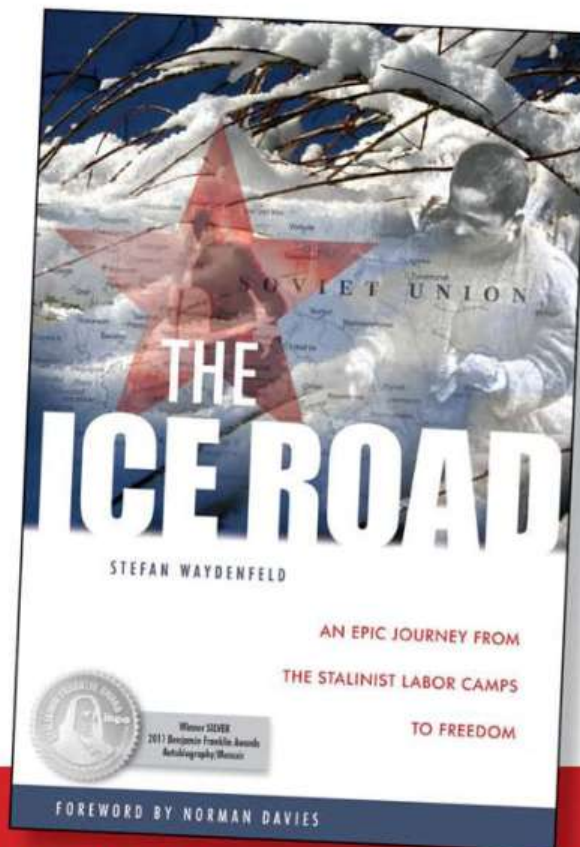
World War II exploded into history on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, Poland's allies Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Two weeks later, on September 17, 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east—making Poland the only Western Ally invaded and occupied by two enemies: Germany and the Soviet Union allied together under a secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

The consequences of this first Russian front:

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Marshal Georgy Zhukov was a victim of Soviet political paranoia.

THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR, as World War II came to be known in the Soviet Union, provided the stage upon which Marshal Georgy Zhukov achieved lasting fame.

The architect of the Red Army's offensive against the Third Reich, Zhukov and his armies had occupied the Nazi capital of Berlin and completed a massive military campaign against a formidable German military machine. Although his service in the Far East is less familiar, it is nevertheless important as well. Zhukov's victory over the Japanese at Khalkin-Gol

in Mongolia in 1939 was a deciding factor in keeping the expansionist regime in Tokyo from prosecuting a full-scale war against the Soviet Union.

At the end of the war in Europe, Zhukov embodied the will and the power of the world's largest land army. He was a national hero. As such, he was also considered a threat by the paranoid leader of the Soviet Union, Premier Josef Stalin. On June 24, 1945, as a tumultuous victory parade rolled through Red Square, Stalin was already planning the exile of the military man. For less than a year, Zhukov served as military commander of the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany. During the summer of 1946, he was deputy defense minister and commander of all Soviet land forces.

Biographer Viktor Anfilov points out that Zhukov's tenure in both posts was short-lived. The machinery of political intrigue was in motion, and Stalin began an effort to systematically destroy his reputation. A number of Zhukov's colleagues were coerced into bringing false charges against him, and Stalin denounced the hero. Zhukov was relegated to command of the Odessa Military District.

By the end of 1947 Zhukov was again in Moscow—this time with the KGB shadowing him. A heart attack and an uncharacteristic moment of mercy on the part of Stalin probably saved him from prison. "They sank to such obscene and disgusting depths as to accuse me of masterminding a military plot against Stalin," Zhukov wrote of the charges being leveled against him. He was exiled again, this time to the Urals Military District.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, Zhukov again gained political prominence. He was appointed defense minister in 1955 by Premier Nikita Krushchev, himself a veteran of the Great Patriotic War. A Stalinist faction of the Soviet Central Committee became disenchanted with Krushchev's leadership and attempted to depose him, but a strong stand by Zhukov proved critical. "[Foreign Minister Vyacheslav] Molotov and his supporters want to bring back the Stalinist methods of leadership," Zhukov told the assembly. "We can-

not stand for that. If you continue to oppose the Party line I will be compelled to turn to the army and the people."

While his stirring words helped Krushchev retain power, perhaps they contributed to his political undoing once again. Accused a second time of attempting to establish a military government with himself as its head, Zhukov was forced into retirement by Krushchev.

"From autumn 1957 to May 1965 he was in total disgrace," writes Anfilov. "He was now labeled a 'Bonapartist' and the slanderous articles that appeared about him in the press frightened off some of his old comrades-in-arms. It was now forbidden to hang his portrait in military establishments and his name was heard only rarely. None of this, however, affected his popular image as the national hero who had saved his country from the Nazis, and when on 8 May 1965, for the first time since being ostracized, he appeared on the podium at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses for the victory celebrations, he was greeted by a storm of applause and shouts of 'Hurrah for Zhukov!'"

During his lifetime, Georgy Zhukov was four times awarded the medal of Hero of the Soviet Union. His military accomplishments are among the greatest in the history of armed conflict. He penned his memoirs and lived his last years in relative comfort.

Like many other military heroes before and since, Zhukov was better able to cope with the maneuvering of large armies than the web of political intrigue.

WWII: Combat on the RUSSIAN FRONT

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The Marauding Marder

Cobbled together from existing weapons, the motorized Marder plugged a dangerous gap in German antitank capability.

Signal



A German Marder self-propelled antitank gun churns across the Russian steppe as SS soldiers occupy a defensive position recently held by Red Army troops.

ON THE SECOND DAY of Adolf Hitler's bold invasion of Russia in June 1941, the Germans were confronted with one of their most glaring shortcomings in weapons and armament. It occurred when General Mikhail Kirponos unleashed the formidable Russian T-34 medium tank as part of a determined counterattack in the Ukraine against a portion of General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South.

When the pack of T-34s bore down on elements of the German 197th Infantry Division in the Ukraine, the foot soldiers of the Fatherland were stunned with disbelief as the shells they were firing from their 37mm antitank guns glanced harmlessly off the thick, sloped armor of the T-34s. It was a discovery that other German forces the length of the Eastern Front would make in the coming days and weeks. Something had to be done to correct the situation—and fast.

The overwhelming victories that Germany won in the early campaigns of World War II were largely the result of the superior training of its forces and the superb tactics used

by commanders at all levels. Although it may have seemed in the blitzkrieg attacks on Poland, France, and the Balkans that the Germans had superior equipment, a number of shortcomings were clearly evident in the quality and quantity of their war material when facing Britain, the Soviet Union, and later the United States.

The Germans were well aware in the years leading up to the war in Europe of the need to provide self-propelled armor to assist infantry in capturing enemy strongpoints and surviving enemy tank attacks. As early as 1935, General Eric von Manstein had drafted a memo to the chief of the General Staff urging that each infantry division should contain its own assault gun battalion for these purposes. The result was the stout, reliable Sturmgeschutz, which began field trials in 1937. As it was readied for service, a major squabble broke out among the inspectors general of the German infantry, artillery, and tank services as to who would be responsible for the vehicles.

The panzer men, who saw such a vehicle encroaching on their production resources, wanted nothing to do with it. Almost by default, responsibility for the assault gun landed in the lap of the German artillery. Although the design of the Sturmgeschutz was approved, crews were not trained quickly enough, and predictably it took a backseat to tank production. Thus, when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the assault guns had not yet entered full production.

The principal weapon with which the Germans countered enemy tanks in the opening days of the war was the 37mm Pak gun that was towed by truck or by a team of horses. Von Manstein was not the only visionary general who foresaw the need for self-propelled artillery. Col. Gen. Heinz Guderian pushed for the development of a self-propelled gun that would accompany advancing Panzers. Unlike tanks with turrets that rotate to allow the gun to fire in different directions without repositioning the vehicle, early self-propelled German artillery featured fixed superstructures housing guns with very

limited traverse. Rather than being a liability, the fixed superstructure allowed for the installation of a larger caliber gun than on tanks, which had to strike a balance between firepower and mobility.

Whereas motorized assault guns such as the Sturmgeschütz were intended primarily for use against infantry targets, the job of what Guderian envisioned as tank destroyers, or Panzerjäger, was to lie in wait and use their substantial firepower to penetrate the thick armor of enemy medium and heavy tanks, something that existing antitank guns of smaller caliber simply could not do.

Although the Germans made many improvisations, the only officially sanctioned effort to field a tank destroyer before the war began was to outfit the Panzerkampfwagen (PzKpfw) I light tanks with the 47mm L43 Czech gun, an invention dubbed the Panzerjäger I. This early tank destroyer saw service in 1940 and 1941, but the gun lacked sufficient punch to be truly effective. The need for the Panzerjägers became acute when the Germans came face to face in 1941 with the Russian T-34 medium and KV-1 heavy tanks on the Eastern Front as well as the British Matilda II medium tank in North Africa.

The Germans realized after invading Russia that they had no panzers, either in the field or in the planning stages, that could compete with the T-34 or KV-1. Indeed, German industry was struggling to keep pace with the demands of an army engaged on multiple fronts. To help remedy the situation, the German high command issued an order on December 22, 1941, to develop a tank destroyer that could defeat the best enemy tanks. Since time was of the essence, weapons developers were given the leeway to cobble together whatever parts of existing weapons systems deemed necessary. The intent was to field, in a relatively short time, a formidable Panzerjäger on an interim basis until a more comprehensive design could be tested and manufactured. The result was the Marder series.

The idea that the Germans hit on was to take a large, formidable antitank gun and

fit it onto the chassis of an obsolete armored fighting vehicle. For the first Marder to enter production, the Marder II, they chose the Panzer II chassis. As for the gun, some models of the Marder would use the German-made Pak 75 while others would shrewdly make use of the Soviet 76.2mm antitank gun captured in abundance during the opening weeks of Operation Barbarossa.

The Germans would produce during 1942 and 1943 six main variants of the Marder, marrying different guns to either the Panzer II chassis, the Czech-built 38(t) chassis, or the French-built Lorraine tractor chassis. Two additional variants, technically raising the number to eight, were produced in small numbers using the chassis of the French Hotchkiss light tank and the French FCM 36 medium tank. The informal classifications of Marder I, II, and III that came into being probably arose from the fact that each of the three types used a different chassis. Yet, from a chronological standpoint, the numbering system is misleading as the Marder II was the first to enter service.

The Marder II Ausf. (model) A, B, C, and F entered service in April 1942 and were equipped with the German-made 75mm L46 Pak 40/2 gun, which was capable of hurling a 12.6-pound projectile at 1,800 feet per second. The official designation of this model was the SdKfz 131. The other models, the Marder II Ausf. D and E, employed the captured Russian Model 36 76.2mm antitank gun rechambered to take the German 75mm round. Packing an even greater punch than the L46 Pak 40/2, the Russian cannon could hurl rounds at 2,430 feet per second. This vehicle was designated SdKfz 132.

At the assembly plant, workers fitted the gun carriage minus the wheels onto the chassis using a specially made mounting plate. The plate was shaped like a bridge and attached to the top of the chassis in the front and back with large bolts. The superstructure surrounding the gun was open at the top and consisted of a moveable gun shield in front that was thick enough to protect the gunner and

loader from small-arms fire. The fixed armor plate used on the sides was thinner than the shield on the front and therefore provided less protection. Whereas the Marder II hull had protective armor ranging from 14.5mm to 35mm in thickness, the superstructure plating was only 8mm to 10mm thick.

All Marder IIs were powered by a six-cylinder Maybach HL 62 gas engine that had six forward gears and one reverse gear. In mild temperatures, the driver cranked the engine using an electric starter, but the vehicle was equipped with an inertia starter for sub-freezing temperatures. The A, B, C, and F used a five-wheel, quarter-elliptical leaf spring suspension, while the D and E employed a torsion bar suspension mounting four large road wheels without return rollers.

The Marder II A, B, C, and F each weighed about 11 tons and, not counting the barrel, were 15 feet long with a width of about seven feet and height of slightly more than seven feet. The crews were made up of a driver and wireless operator who were positioned as they normally would have been in the Panzer II, and the gunner and loader who rode atop in the superstructure. The Marder II had a top speed of 25 miles per hour. It carried 44 gallons of fuel in two tanks and could travel 93 miles on the road and 62 miles offroad.

The two types of Marder IIs were markedly different in appearance. The D and E featured a higher superstructure positioned slightly further toward the rear of the vehicle than the A, B, C, and F versions. The Marder II could carry up to 37 shells, and most crews stored a 7.92mm MG34 machine gun in the fighting compartment to engage enemy infantry when necessary.

The Germans assembled 531 of the Marder IIs armed with the Pak 40/2 antitank gun and 185 of the Marder IIs equipped with the Russian Model 36 antitank gun. The Marder design was not without its drawbacks. For one, the crews fighting on the Eastern Front were exposed to the extreme temperatures typ-



ABOVE: This self-propelled gun, a variant of the Marder, includes the Czech-designed 38(t) chassis. It mounts a powerful 75mm cannon and a 7.62mm machine gun for defense against infantry attack. **BELOW:** The high silhouette of the Marder III presented an excellent target for enemy antitank guns, while the open turret often exposed the gun's crew to dangerous fire.

ical of the Russian steppe in colder months. What's more, the high superstructure made the vehicle top-heavy and difficult to drive in rugged terrain. The Marder's high profile also made it highly vulnerable to enemy artillery, antitank guns, and tanks. The Marder IIs were issued to Panzerjäger Abteilung (tank destroyer battalions) integral to elite infantry and panzer divisions, as well as other units, and served primarily on the Eastern Front.

The Marder IIIs, which were considered the best of the Marder family, were built in three different styles. Each of the three styles used the extremely well designed Czech-built 38(t) chassis rather than the Panzer II chassis. The first of these entered production in March 1942 designated as the SdKfz 139 and were equipped with the Russian Model 36 76.2mm gun, again rechambered to accept German 75mm ammunition. In the first three months of production, the Germans managed to roll 120 out of the Bohemian-Moravian Machine Factory AG of the Praga Works in Prague. They would eventually produce 344 of this variant, 117 of which were sent to North Africa between March 1942 and May 1943. Their appearance in combat jarred the British, who initially mistook the 76.2mm gun for the dreaded German 88mm cannon.

The first Marder IIIs produced had a suspension comprising four large road

wheels on each side that hung in pairs from leaf springs attached to the hull. They were powered by a 125-horsepower Praga EPA water-cooled gas engine that could reach a top speed of 26 miles per hour. Some of the later Marder IIIs were retrofitted with twin carburetors that allowed drivers to accelerate to 30 miles per hour on good roads. Like the Marder II, the early Marder IIIs had a high superstructure with a relatively small fighting compartment located in the center of the vehicle.

The later Marder IIIs, designated as the SdKfz 138, featured the improved German 75mm L46 40/3 gun. The SdKfz 138 Type H entered production in May 1942 and had a forward fighting compartment and a rear engine, while the SdKfz 138 Type M had a much larger fighting compartment placed at the rear of the vehicle

and the engine located in the middle. By putting the fighting compartment at the rear, the designers not only improved the vehicle's overall handling on and off road, but also placed the gun crew in a safer position during combat. Altogether, the Germans produced 1,577 of the late-model Marder IIIs.

In the summer of 1942, the Germans also began converting captured French vehicles into tank destroyers that were dubbed the Marder I and had the official designation SdKfz 135. This was possible because the Germans captured in good condition a large number of French Tracteur Blinde 37L personnel carriers, better known as the Lorraine, that were used to tow artillery. Captain Alfred Becker, commander of Sturmgeschütz Abteilung 200, used his pre-war industry connections to arrange to have as many as 184 of these vehicles converted. The work was done not only in Germany, but also in Paris.

To convert the tractors, workers removed the existing transport compartment and replaced it with an enclosed superstructure that ran almost the entire length of the vehicle. The Marder I using the Lorraine chassis employed the 75mm Pak 40/1 L48 gun behind a large armored shield. Initially deployed to Russia, they were deemed inferior to the Marder IIs and IIIs and eventually were shunted back to France and other static fronts to bolster occupation units. They would see action in the Normandy campaign in 1944 when the 21st Panzer Division took two dozen of them into action.

Other vehicles that shared the Marder I



designation married the 75mm Pak 40/1 L48 gun to either the French Hotchkiss H-39 light tanks or the FCM 36 medium tanks that were captured by the Germans during the fall of France. Although there is no definitive record of how many of these alternative versions were built, it is estimated that as few as 24 Hotchkiss chassis and 10 FCM chassis were converted into tank destroyers.

As the war progressed during 1942 in Russia and North Africa, the Marders were loaded onto rail cars and shipped to the fronts. Organized into battalions to support both infantry and armor, they served different functions depending on which units they were assigned to support. Their role on the battlefield was to lie in wait for enemy armor to attack or counterattack the units they were supporting. Rather than being parceled out to small units, they were generally concentrated so that they would have a telling effect on enemy armor.

The crews of the Marders would scour the battlefield for protected positions in which to deploy their vehicle when the battle began. A battle-tested crew would look not for just one position but for several different positions to which they might shift. The nature of the terrain would dictate the type of obstacles they could hide behind that would make it more difficult for enemy armor to reach them during combat. The tank destroyers preferred concealed positions behind rivers, marshes, minefields, or hedgerows. In areas where there was abundant foliage, the crews were known to cover the entire vehicle, including the open-topped superstructure, with foliage to make them difficult for the enemy to spot at a distance.

Marder crews supporting infantry would provide fire during the initial advance and lumber forward once the infantry had seized its objective. At that point, they would provide close support until the objective was firmly secured before retiring to the rear. When assisting friendly armor on the attack, Marder crews would secure the flanks and also lend their long-range fire to the overall weight of the attack. Although these were

National Archives



ABOVE: An American soldier inspects the hulk of a Model M Marder that has been disabled by a direct hit against its chassis from an Allied artillery shell. **BELOW:** Crewmen scramble around the turret of a Marder III as the vehicle prepares to move out of the close quarters of an occupied town. The Marder was not well suited to urban combat.



Amber Books

the optimum tactics, circumstances of a given campaign would often dictate how the Marders were used. For example, in von Manstein's Kharkov counteroffensive of February and March 1943, Marders transported combat engineers and even panzergrenadiers into battle. During that campaign, Marder IIs and Marder IIIs were used by both the 1st SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler and 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich. In Kharkov and other battles on the Eastern Front, the panzergrenadiers relied heavily on the Marders for support when Soviet tanks attacked in force.

The Panzerjäger I, the Marders, and the Nashorn were all improvised, first-generation tank destroyers built to temporarily fill a void until the Germans could design and produce a more sophisticated second generation of tank destroyers with enclosed superstructures and lower silhouettes. When the advantage on the

fronts in Russia and North Africa shifted to the Allies in late 1942, Marders and other tank destroyers took on the growing burden of stopping or delaying enemy offensives. It was during this period that the Germans mastered the art of luring enemy armor into traps. The German tanks would purposely retreat through a well-established line of tank destroyers. When the enemy armor pursued them, the tank destroyers would devastate the pursuing enemy armor from well-concealed positions.

The production of Marders continued through 1943 and, for some variants, into 1944, although by that time the Germans were producing a number of other tank destroyers, including the Nashorn with its powerful 88mm gun, as well as a second generation of tank destroyers that were fully enclosed, such as the Elefant, Hetzer, Jagdpanzer IV, and Jagdpanther.

The fact that so many tank destroyers were fielded reflected the difficulties the German tank industry was having in determining which armored fighting vehicles merited priority. Because it was easier and cheaper to produce a tank destroyer than a tank with a movable turret, large numbers of tank destroyers were produced toward the end of the war. In addition to the Waffen SS divisions, other units fortunate to have a Panzerjäger Abteilung were the Grossdeutschland Division and the 1st Paratroop Panzer Division Hermann Göring.

Despite its shortcomings, the Marder added weight to the German war machine as it advanced to the Volga River and into the Caucasus Mountains in late 1942. When the initiative on the Eastern Front shifted firmly to the Soviets in the second half of the conflict, the Marders and other tank destroyers became a staple of the German defensive efforts, blunting Soviet tank attacks. The more than 2,800 Marders fielded during World War II were a proven counterweight to enemy armor.

William Welsh is the Editor of Sovereign Media's MILITARY HERITAGE magazine and has written articles on conflicts from the Middle Ages to World War II. He is also a regular contributor to WWII HISTORY.

A dead German lies in the foreground as Red Army troops storm an enemy strongpoint south of Lake Ladoga on November 1, 1943. Operation Spark finally facilitated the breaking of the 900-day siege of Leningrad.

WITH THE GERMAN SIXTH ARMY IN ITS DEATH THROES at Stalingrad in January 1943, Stavka, the Soviet High Command, sought to capitalize on the disaster by unleashing massive offensives along the entire German-Soviet front. Although eclipsed by the gargantuan operations that followed against the German Army Groups Center and South, the fighting was no less fierce in the north.

Since September 8, 1941, Leningrad lay besieged by Field Marshal Georg von Küchler's Army Group North and by Germany's Finnish allies. Of Leningrad's prewar population of nearly three million, 637,000 remained in the bombed city; the rest had been evacuated or had succumbed to the siege. At least the worst days of starvation had passed, alleviated by summer gardens of cabbages and potatoes. Nevertheless, the city remained in deadly danger.

Five previous attempts to break the blockade in 1941 and 1942 had resulted in costly Soviet defeats. German artillery shells continued to rain onto Leningrad and only the "Road of Life," the supply line across frozen Lake Ladoga, enabled supplies and reinforcements to reach the city. However, the Germans remained too weak to capture the city by direct assault.

Lieutenant General Leonid A. Govorov's Leningrad Front staunchly continued to defend Leningrad and hold onto a bridgehead at Oranienbaum, bordering the Gulf of Finland to the west. To the east, Hero of the Soviet Union General Kirill A. Meretskov stood ready to lead his Volkhov Front in a renewed breakthrough attempt to Leningrad and to Govorov's front. On Meretskov's left flank, General Filipp N. Starikov's Eighth

Govorov planned the attack in detail. The Leningrad Front's Sixty-seventh Army would attack the Shlisselburg-Siniavino corridor from the west while the Volkhov Front's Second Shock Army and the Eighth Army would attack from the east. Govorov received an additional rifle division, five rifle brigades, and an antiaircraft artillery division, while Meretskov's front was strengthened by five rifle divisions. Both fronts also received numerous additional mortar, tank, and artillery regiments and battalions. To make sure that the attack would succeed, Govorov amassed three times as many artillery pieces than had been used in the failed attacks of 1941-1942.

Govorov's Sixty-seventh Army was commanded by General Mikhail P. Dukhanov, one of the Soviet Union's best commanders. Meretskov's Second Shock Army was led by Lt. Gen. Vladimir Z. Romanovskii. In addition to the regular troops, 10 partisan detachments were supplied with 2,000 rifles, hundreds of machine guns, and thousands of pounds of explosives to create

BREAKING THE NAZI STRANGLEHOLD

SOVIET OPERATION SPARK RELIEVED THE BESIEGED CITY OF LENINGRAD.

Army stood by for additional support. Now, like never before, there was a real chance that the ring around Leningrad could finally be burst open. It was Govorov who figured out just how it could be done.

Govorov's Operation Iskra, or Spark, sought to secure a land bridge to Leningrad from the east. To do this Govorov had to overcome the German divisions in the Shlisselburg-Siniavino corridor. Shlisselburg literally meant "key fortress," as named by Peter the Great, who realized that the fortress town was the key to the Ingra, the name of the region to the south of Lake Ladoga. Now, over 200 years later, Shlisselburg and the land to its east and south were keys to the relief of Leningrad. The Shlisselburg corridor blocked the linkup between the Leningrad and the Volkhov Fronts and was a base for future German attacks against Leningrad and against the Road of Life. The corridor stretched south from the shores of Lake Ladoga between Shlisselburg to the west and Lipka to the east. Roughly eight miles wide at the north, the corridor began to widen, like a bottleneck, in a southward direction for six miles. At that point the commanding heights of Siniavino rose from the forested bog.

BY LUDWIG HEINRICH DYCK

havoc in the German rear. Senior Soviet commander Marshal Georgi Zhukov flew in at the last minute to coordinate Spark.

In contrast to the Soviet fronts, Küchler's Army Group North was weakened by having to give up divisions that were even more desperately needed in the southern and central Russian sectors. Küchler lost the Eleventh Army and a further nine divisions from the Eighteenth Army. Despite this, Küchler expected the Eighteenth Army to continue to besiege Leningrad from the southwest, south, and southeast. At the same time, the Eighteenth Army had to prevent a breakout from the Oranienbaum

bridgehead and block any relief by the Volkhov Front.

The Eighteenth Army was commanded by Col. Gen. Georg Lindemann, a Prussian officer and battle-hardened veteran of World War I and a holder of the Knight's Cross. Well aware of his army's vital task, Lindemann prepared his troops with the words, "As the source of the Bolshevik Revolution, as the city of Lenin, it is the second capital of the Soviets.... For the Soviet regime the liberation of Leningrad would equal the defense of Moscow, the battle for Stalingrad."

To prevent this liberation, Lindemann naturally made sure his strongest defenses were in the Shlisselburg-Siniavino corridor. Here, the XXVI Corps's 1st, 227th, and 170th Infantry Divisions and the LIV Corps's SS Police Division and parts of the 5th Mountain Division waited in their earthen dugouts and trenches in three defen-

sive belts amid forested, frozen swamps and stone villages. Three regiments of the 96th Infantry Division stood by as reserve at Mga. Despite their strong positions, Lindemann's forces were stretched so thinly that the average divisional frontage was over 10 miles long.

Govorov and Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a member of the Defense Committee, walked behind a T-34 testing the ice of the River Neva. Suddenly the tank slid out of control, and the ice cracked in all directions. As the metal giant plunged into the river, Voroshilov nearly fell in as well. Govorov reacted instantaneously, quickly grabbing Voroshilov and yanking him back. The tank driver managed to swim out of the tank and save himself. The weakness of the ice convinced Govorov to postpone the attack from December 27 to January 12th. In the meantime, he ordered the Sixty-seventh Army to carry out full simulations to prepare the troops.

Meanwhile, Soviet engineer, sapper, and pontoon battalions readied the front for Spark. Trench lines were dug to protect the movement of troops to the jumping-off points, new observation posts were laid out, gun covers built and camouflaged. Bridges over streams and miles of roads were laid down. Engineer companies cleared whole minefields, and Soviet intelligence gathered photographs of enemy positions. The Soviets had a fairly clear picture of the German defense while Soviet security itself had remained tight. The Germans, although aware of Soviet objectives, could not foresee the exact day the attack would happen.

On September 2, 1943, German soldiers, camouflaged against the snow, which already blankets the ground, move forward. Alert to the potential Soviet offensive that was to come, the Germans took a heavy toll in Russian casualties, both military and civilian.



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During the night of January 11, Soviet bombers dropped their loads on selected German positions within the corridor. A predawn bone-chilling wind blew across the frozen Neva. With the 170th Infantry Division just outside Gorodok hospital, a Lieutenant Winacker walked down a trench. The landscape was quieter than usual. From behind his MG-42, a gunner remarked, "I don't like the look of it. Not a single Ivan in sight. Normally they scuttle about ... dragging their soup and bread into their positions." From the high bank of the riverside, Winacker swept the ice of the Neva with his binoculars. He cursed; there were footsteps in the snow below the bank. At night Soviet engineers had opened a path through the minefields! Suddenly, the ground shook and the sky trembled with a monstrous roar. Instinctively Winacker threw his body into the side of the trench. Above him, frozen earth and steel fragments hurtled through the air.

At 9:30 AM, on January 12, 1943, Govorov and Merestkov opened Operation Spark, the first phase of the Second Battle of Lake Ladoga, with the thunder of 4,500 artillery pieces. One gun was positioned for every 20 feet of front line. On top of the artillery, the heavy naval guns of the Red Fleet in Leningrad harbor joined in the bombardment.

Bridges, buildings, trenches, and trees exploded and collapsed in showers of steel, earth, and wood. Deep in his dugout, a German soldier grimly remarked, "They aren't joking this time."

Over two hours later the barrage ended with an earsplitting Katyusha rocket barrage. Then ground attack aircraft from the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Air Armies droned overhead, bombing German strongpoints at Poselok (Workers Settlements) Nos. 4, 5, and 7 and at Siniavino. The Soviet first-echelon divisions advanced behind their artillery barrage. Four divisions attacked the Shlisselburg-Siniavino bottleneck from the west, and five attacked from the east.

As the artillery barrage moved farther inland, German soldiers shook off dirt, bandaged wounds, or dug themselves out of piles of dirt. On the southern flank of Dukhanov's Sixty-seventh Army, the Soviet 45th Guards Rifle Division launched Spark through a bridgehead already on the German side of the River Neva. There the 46th Guards Rifle Division's trench lines were so close to the German trenches that the two merged into each other. Machine guns blazed, grenades were hurled through the air, and entrenching tools and bayonets stabbed and hacked as the Germans repulsed the 45th Guards Rifle Division in close combat.

At Shlisselburg on the northern flank the Soviets never got to within bayonet range. The assaults of the 86th Rifle Division withered in the devastating fire of the German 227th Infantry Division, which left the ice littered with Soviet bodies.

In the center of Dukhanov's front, at Gorodok and Marino, the 170th Infantry Division landers scrambled to their positions as fast as they could. In awe they beheld the massed regiments of the Soviet 136th and 268th Rifle Divisions charging across the frozen Neva. At Gorodok the German field howitzers and mortars roared into the Soviet masses, hurling chunks of ice and flesh through the air and then moving inland to target further assault waves. The Soviets had no cover, with their cry of "Urta" they charged on or died. Only a few of the first wave made it to the German side of the river, where they threw themselves onto the ground for cover or battered their way forward.

At Marino, beneath the thick concrete roof of the power station, a 170th Infantry Division machine gunner cautioned, "Wait for it. Let them get nice and close," before his



ABOVE: Colonel General Georg Lindemann, a Prussian, commanded the German Eighteenth Army at Leningrad. TOP: Lieutenant General Leonid A. Govorov commanded the Leningrad Front and stubbornly defended a crucial bridgehead.

MG-42 mowed the Soviets down like a giant scythe. The first wave of Soviets was devastated, dead, or dying on the ice, but behind it came a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth wave. The last broke through the German defense but only after 3,000 Soviets had died or lay wounded on the ice. Govorov and Dukhanov lost no time in exploiting the penetration. By the evening of the first day, the Soviet 136th and 268th Rifle Divisions had driven a wedge three miles wide and two miles deep into the German defensive belt between Shlisselburg and Gorodok. By 6 PM Soviet sappers had laid bridges north and south of Marino. Soon the bridges trembled under the wide tracks of T-34 medium tanks. German intelligence reported four Soviet rifle divisions and one tank brigade at Marino. One of these was the 86th Rifle Division that, after its failure at Shlisselburg, followed the 136th Rifle Division through the Marino gap.

To the east, the attack by Meretskov on January 12 fared similarly to that by Govorov. Here, too, the Germans firmly clung to their strongholds but likewise could not prevent Romanovskii's Second Shock Army from slowly penetrating around their flanks. Romanovskii deployed most of his armor on his left flank supported by Second Army shock troops and assault groups from two divisions of Starikov's Eighth Army. An iron fist was poised to smash its way through Kruglaia Grove, Poselok No. 8, and Gaitolova. Dukhanov aimed for the vital Siniavino Heights, but initially only Kruglaia Grove was captured by 327th Rifle Division infantry supported by tanks. Everywhere else the German defense held.

At Gaitolova, Sergeant Franz Juschkat of the German XXVI Corps' 1st Infantry Division awoke with sand dribbling into his mouth. His whole bunker rocked. Juschkat jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "This is it; Ivan has begun his attack." A moment later Juschkat was outside scanning a cloud of smoke that rose from a horizon pulsing with intense artillery flashes that grew brighter and bigger. After two hours the artillery moved closer, toward Juschkat's platoon's reserve position.

Now the German artillery responded but it did not silence the Soviet barrage, which crashed upon the German reserve position for half an hour. It then moved on toward the German artillery positions. Juschkat and his platoon crawled out of their bunker. Thirty feet away a neighboring platoon's position had been leveled. All 12 men who had held the position were dead. Juschkat gave the order, "Prepare to move out." The platoon spread out as Juschkat led his 25 men forward. Smoke obscured the way ahead.

Soviets came running toward them. Both sides threw themselves to the ground. Machine guns rattled. The Soviets had broken 600 yards into the German main line of resistance. Juschkat rose up, "1st and 2nd Squads attack with me! Up—Move out!" Covered by the rapid fire of the pla-

toon's MG-42, Juschkat led his men into the enemy fire. Bullets zipped past him as he dodged side to side. The Soviets were frantically setting up their own machine gun. Juschkat fired his submachine gun from the hip. The Soviets were overrun, killed, or sent to the rear as prisoners. But there were more Soviets ahead and with them were T-34s.

Before the day ended Juschkat would retake a bunker, blow up a T-34 by throwing a grenade into the open hatch, and rescue a comrade whose leg had been reduced to a bloody stump. Papa Juschkat, as his men would come to call him, would go on to earn the Knight's Cross at Lake Ladoga. His heroic resistance was indicative of the 1st Infantry Division's repeated counterattacks. The division's East Prussians utterly thwarted any breakthrough by the 376th Rifle Division of the Second Shock Army and by the 80th and 256th Rifle Divisions and 73rd Naval Brigade of the Eighth Army.

It was obvious to the commander of 26th Corps, General Carl Hilpert, that his divisions were in dire need of reinforcements. Army commander Lindemann agreed, but the only reinforcements available were three regiments of the 96th Infantry Division stationed at Mga, a combat group from the 5th Mountain Division, and some limited panzer and artillery support. Late on January 12, the 96th Division's 284th regiment with four Tigers and nine Mark IIIs of 1st Company, Heavy Panzer Battalion 502, struck toward the Scheidies forest to prevent a Soviet outflanking maneuver to the east of Gorodok.

German soldiers pass one of scores of destroyed Red Army tanks near Leningrad. Although Russian losses in armor were severe, Soviet production capacity made good on their replacements.

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Gorodok in turn received the 283rd Regiment of the 96th Infantry Division along with a battery of the 36th Flak Regiment and a battery of 150mm howitzers. The two regiments of the 96th would become embroiled with the 268th and the 136th Rifle Divisions, supported by armor of the 61st Tank Brigade. On the extreme southern end of the western flank, the 5th Mountain Division reinforced the German lines at Moskovkaia-Dubrovka. The third 96th Infantry Division regiment, the 287th, was sent to the eastern flank of the battle to help out the hard-pressed 227th Infantry Division at Poselok No. 1.

During the night of January 12, grenadiers of the 284th Regiment forced their way forward through the deep snow and gloomy thickets of the Scheidies forest. The men cursed; at times the snow came up to their chests. The crash of a Soviet 76.2mm antitank gun broke the still of the night. Salvos of the Katyushas, nicknamed Stalin's organs, howled in their direction.

Soviet machine guns opened up from the forest, and tracers flashed through the dark. A staff sergeant named Grueninger threw himself to the ground and crawled forward, leading his platoon. With a burst of his submachine gun, one of Grueninger's men cut down a Soviet creeping up on the platoon's right. At this point the machine-gun flashes were only 30 feet away. Hidden behind a snowdrift, Grueninger lobbed in three grenades. Grueninger and his platoon charged to finish the surviving Soviets. Victory seemed theirs, but then a shout froze the German soldiers' blood, "Tanks up front!"

The dawn of January 13 rose over the snow-covered, frozen bog upon which 24 T-34 medium and T-60 light tanks of the 61st Tank Brigade rumbled toward the forest. Their cannon thundered; their rounds ripped apart tree tops. Branches, pieces of wood, and steel fragments hurtled through the air. The MG-42s turned their attention to the Soviet

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infantry that advanced beside the incoming tanks. Using the cover of a snowdrift, two grenadiers outflanked a T-34. They threw their explosive charges under its overhanging turret and flung themselves into the snow. A tremendous explosion dislodged the turret. Despite such heroics, the T-34s nearly spelled the end of the German regiment. Three grenadier company commanders were already dead when the Tigers of Heavy Panzer Battalion 502 came to the rescue.

Small trees and saplings gave way to the tracks of the approaching four Tiger tanks. Although the Tiger had only recently made its combat debut, the Soviets were quick to learn that it was like no other tank they had faced before. The white-painted Tigers formed up in a wide wedge and, at the sight of the T-34s, opened fire. The Tigers rocked from the recoil of their deadly 88mm guns, leaving two T-34s in flames.

The Soviet tankers had to turn to face their most feared enemy. By the time they did so, two more T-34s were knocked out while the Tigers dispersed into cover. Company commander First Lieutenant Bodo von Gerdtehl's Tiger rolled down into a defile and then heaved up on the other side. Gerdtehl watched as a T-34 plowed through some undergrowth and swung its gun on another Tiger. "Achtung Schneider! Enemy to your right," called Gerdtehl to his gunner who already had the T-34 in his sight. Schneider's round struck the T-34's right flank, blasting the turret.

That T-34 never got a chance to shoot, but another one had already singled out Gerdtehl's Tiger, which shook from the impact of an armor-piercing round that had failed to penetrate. Schneider tried to fire back, but before he could do so another round crashed into the Tiger's gun mantlet. Schneider felt a long steel splinter penetrate his chest, mortally wounding him. His comrades carried him back to an infantry position while the tank duel concluded. After 12 tanks were lost, the remaining T-34s retreated. Gerdtehl's Tiger was recovered, but as evening fell on January 13 the Soviets attacked again.

From his open turret hatch, platoon leader First Lieutenant Hans Bölter waved to Gerdtehl. Bölter ordered his platoon of two Tigers to move out. One following the other, the two white behemoths rumbled into the twilight of January 13. Coming with them was a handful of light Mark III tanks. Bölter scanned the terrain from his

hatch until the flash of an anti-tank gun persuaded him to duck inside. The Tiger turned and dipped into a depression. Inside, the crew braced themselves. Another round zoomed by a few meters to the right. The Tiger halted, and its gunner zeroed in on the antitank gun's muzzle flash. The 88mm round blew up the Soviet gun position, igniting its ammunition stockpile. The duel with the

anti-tank gun was the prelude to a harrowing night battle.

It had become so dark that the Tigers lost sight of each other even though they were only a few hundred meters apart. Soviet soldiers watched the ominous, gigantic, white silhouette of the Tiger grind over the snow. The Soviets were nearly invisible, but Bölter caught sight of their shadowy movement through the Tiger's vision slit.

"Bow and turret machine guns open fire," ordered Bölter. Fire spit from the guns, flashing brightly on the snow and illuminating the Tiger's massive 88mm gun. Bölter peeked from his turret hatch as the second Tiger opened fire. The round zipped by Bölter's Tiger, almost hitting it. Ahead, another muzzle flashed in the night—a T-

34 just 900 yards ahead. If any of the Soviet infantry survived the machine guns, Bölter would have to deal with them later. The Tiger came to a halt, and the gun swung and fired.

Instantly, a column of flame shot from the T-34's position. The white flames reflected off the steel of Bölter's Tiger, making him an easy target for another T-34. The ground exploded. Blinding light flashed into the vision slits. Bölter's Tiger sped up and slipped into the darkness. Gunner Bastian Gröschl applied some foot pressure to swing the turret around until the T-34 was in his crosshairs, and then he pushed the firing button. He scored another hit, but this time the 88mm round deflected off the T-34's sloped turret armor.

The T-34 fired again, another miss and its last chance. Gröschl's second shot hit between the turret and hull, the weak spot. The whole turret flipped into the air, and white flames shot from the hull. Two T-34s were down, but now more were moving in from the right and left. In the melee that followed, driver Hölzl deftly outmaneuvered the T-34s that were trying to outflank the Tigers.

Driving into a defile, Bölter's Tiger emerged on the other side to run into a T-34 that was less than 600 feet away. At such close range any hit would be a kill. Both tanks fired at the same time. The T-34 round missed by only a meter. Gröschl's round did not and turned the Soviet tank into a charred wreck. Another Soviet round shot out of the night, bouncing off the Tiger's thick frontal armor and jolting the whole crew inside. Gröschl replied and knocked out another T-34. Close by, the German grenadiers were fighting to regain their former positions.

Firing his submachine gun out of his turret, Bölter drove off a group of Soviet infantry. After this, the Tiger shook from three more antitank rounds, all of which failed to penetrate its armor. Gröschl went on to score his fifth tank kill of the night.

With so many losses, Soviet morale broke. The remaining T-34s fell back but continued to battle the pursuing Tigers. Bölter's Tiger heaved up out of another

depression to spot a T-34 slipping into the cover of a forested area. Gröschl's round hit it in the rear, right in the fuel tanks. The flames of the burning tank reflected crimson on the snow. Bölter continued, hunting a seventh T-34 into the forest. After knocking it out he discovered his radio had broken down.

Suddenly, one after another, two rounds smacked into the Tiger. The smell of gasoline flooded the inside, and flames began to break out on the rear. "Get out!" yelled Hölzl. Everyone jumped out, Bölter landing right on top of a Soviet soldier. Instinctively, Bölter thrust his pistol into the Soviet's chest and pulled the trigger.

Bölter's pistol failed to fire. The Soviet soldier shouted something and ran away. From what Bölter could tell, the Soviet close assault team had pulled back so as not to get caught in the tank duel. In the confusion, Bölter lost his own men and ran into the night. Where was the other Tiger and where were the accompanying Mark IIIs? Soviet soldiers moved close by and shouted at him. Bölter pointed and turned his face away. In the night the Soviets had mistaken him for one of their own and moved off.

After fooling a second group of Soviets, even tailing along with them for a while, Bölter ran into the second Tiger. Its main gun and two machine guns opened up. Diving into a hole in the ground, Bölter barely managed to escape being killed by his own men. Finally, he crawled onto the Tiger's back to be greeted by its commander who pointed a pistol out of the turret hatch.

"It's me, Schutze!" called Bölter in the nick of time. When Bölter crawled inside, his first thoughts were of his comrades, "My crew must be somewhere nearby!" All four of them were soon found. It was only then that Bölter realized he had received four wounds from shell fragments when his own Tiger was knocked out. Against his objections, Bölter was sent to a field hospital.

Together with the Tigers and eight Mark III's, the grenadiers of the 284th Regiment had thrown back the Soviet penetration. Unfortunately, the defensive success was soured when 23 officers of the 284th Regiment were killed in a Soviet air raid on a command post.

At Gorodok, the entrenched 170th Infantry Division had continued to hold up the 268th Rifle Division. MG-42s and sniper rifles lurked inside the shattered windows of smoldering ruins. Two T-34s had their tracks blown off in a German minefield, eliciting cries of joy from the defenders. The reinforcements of the 96th Infantry Division's 283rd Regiment arrived just in time on January 12 to fight their way through the Soviet lines and entrench themselves at a Gorodok hospital.

During the morning of January 13, a force of 26 tanks of the 61st Tank Brigade overran the trenches of the 9th Company. The grenadiers held tight, their lives hanging in the balance. The shadow of the Soviet armor blocked out all light. The metal giants ground their tracks into the snow, attempting to bury the grenadiers alive, but it was so cold that the frozen earth refused to give way. When the Soviet infantry advanced in the wake of its tanks, the German foxholes unexpectedly came alive with a murderous fire.

Deprived of their accompanying infantry, the Soviet tanks continued to penetrate deeper into the German defense until they came under fire from a battery of the 36th Flak Regiment and nearby 150mm howitzers. Twenty-four tanks were destroyed in the ensuing artillery-versus-tank duel, halting the assault.

On the extreme southern flank of the battle on the River Neva in the Moskovskai-Dubrovka sector, the 5th Mountain Division boldly counterattacked on January 13 to drive the 268th Rifle Division back for more than a mile. Although the Germans fought hard and localized points held out, the Soviet assault slowly but surely clawed its way forward. South of Shlisselburg, the snowdrifts were marked by black shell holes. Cannon, machine guns, ammunition boxes, straw boots, and wagon wheels were among the litter of war.

The body of a young Soviet soldier lay dead in the snow. His hands still gripped his rifle. A white camouflage cape had been thrown over his face. Beside him, his helmet rested

on a stick pushed into the ground. On the helmet was a piece of white paper, probably with the boy's name. He had been part of the 86th Rifle Division that advanced from south of Shlisselburg. The 86th Rifle Division fought its way toward Poselok No. 3 and Preobrazhenskoe Hill, where the 227th Infantry Division refused to give more ground. The hill was the main German strongpoint protecting the southern flank of Shlisselburg.

Meanwhile, the 136th Rifle Division supported by tanks of the 61st Tank Brigade pushed back the 96th Infantry Division to advance another mile eastward toward its objective, Poselok No. 5. The latter consisted of little more than a few huts and a small peat processing plant amid a frozen bog. However, Poselok No. 5 lay in the center of the Shlisselburg-Siniavino corridor and through it ran the only north-south road.

While Govorov's divisions closed in on Poselok No. 5 from the west on the 13th, Meretskov's divisions were closing in on No. 5 from the east. The advance of the Soviet fronts was slowed by continuous German resistance. On the Volkhov Front, Lipka still held out but was almost encircled. Supported by artillery, a battalion of the 227th Infantry Division clung to Poselok No. 8, where it defied repeated assaults by the tough Siberian units of the 372nd Rifle Division.

The fresh Soviet 18th Rifle Division and the 98th Tank Brigade were ordered to outflank Poselok No. 8 from the south but could make little headway. Farther south, the German 227th Infantry Division, reinforced by a regiment of the 28th Jäger Division, continued to hold on to Poselok No. 7. At Kruglaia Grove, part of the Soviet gains were lost to a counterattack by the 1st Infantry Division. During the day, strong winds and heavy snowfall aided the Germans by bogging down tank assaults, making accurate artillery fire difficult and preventing Soviet air attacks.

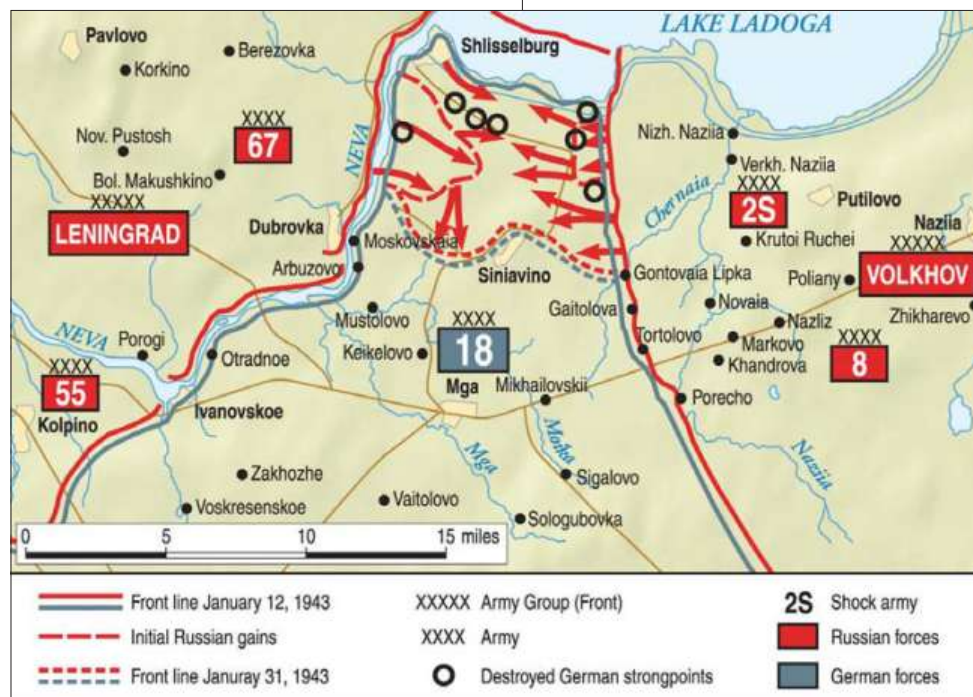
From January 14 onward, the weather improved and with it returned the Soviet air attacks. The Soviets threw in the remainder of their second-echelon divisions. On the 15th, the last German reinforcements arrived, no more than two regiments of the 61st Infantry Division. The regimental groups were hurried up from Pogostye, 20 miles south-east of Mga, and fed into the bottleneck to defend Poselok No. 5. The same day, the 86th Rifle Division took Preobrazhenskoe Hill, which on January 16 proceeded to fight its way into Shlisselburg town.

Vicious street battles followed for the next two days, with the 227th Infantry Division slowly falling back and finally receiving orders to withdraw. Heavy Panzer Battalion 502 continued to be in the thick of the action, but it too was being worn down by attrition. On January 16, Gerdell was killed in a night battle and the battalion commander was wounded. The casualties were worst among crews of the lightly armored Mark IIIs, which were supposed to support the Tigers. Seventeen of the 40 crewmen who manned the eight Mark IIIs were already dead.

In Govorov's center, it took four more days of intense fighting for the 136th Rifle Division and the 61st Tank Brigade to push forward another 1.6 miles to the western outskirts of Poselok No. 5. On that day, the 123rd Rifle Brigade captured Poselok No.

3 but was repulsed at Poselok Nos. 1 and 2. On the southern flank, although reinforced by the 13th Rifle Division, the 102nd Rifle Brigade, and the 142nd Naval Brigade, the 268th Rifle Division was unable to take Gorodok.

On the eastern side of the bottleneck, the Volkhov Front likewise sent more and more units into battle: the 18th and the 71st Rifle Divisions and the 98th Tank



Soviet Operation Spark was intended to raise the German siege of Leningrad once and for all. However, it proved to be only the first phase of the Red Army effort that was successfully concluded the following spring.

Brigade on January 13 along with the 191st Rifle Division on the January 14. They were joined by the 239th and 11th Rifle Divisions, the 12th and 13th Ski Brigades, and the 122nd Tank Brigade over the next three days.

The piecemeal Soviet commitments and the unrelenting German resistance slowed but did not stop the Soviet advance. On January 14, Podgorny Station fell to the 256th Rifle Division. On the morning of the 15th, a renewed assault by the 122nd Tank Brigade and the 372nd Rifle Division captured most of Poselok 8. Momentarily

holding out behind the knocked-out hulls of Soviet tanks, a German battalion led by a Major Ziegler was all but done for. He had to break out that night. One hour before midnight, Ziegler led his grenadiers of the 227th Infantry Division out of Poselok No. 8. Rifles and bayonets held ready, a strong assault group led the way for wounded who were pulled on small, boat-shaped sleds called *akyas*.

Machine gunners guarded the flanks, and the rest of the battalion formed the rear. Ziegler looked into the black night sky; the stars of Orion were their guide southward. A Russian-speaking German got Ziegler's battalion through Soviet lines and helped Ziegler take 40 prisoners before his battalion reached friendly positions.

“THE GERMANS HAD CONSTRUCTED A ROAD THROUGH THE MARSHES. IT WAS AN INFERNO AND I FOUND IT HARD TO IGNORE THE CRIES OF THE WOUNDED ECHOING THROUGH THE SMOKE AND THE TREES.”

With Poselok No. 8 in its grasp, the 372nd Rifle Division pushed on to Poselok No. 1. Soviet forces from both fronts were now on the western and eastern outskirts of Poselok Nos. 1, 2, and 5, separated by only a mile. Stalin was pleased and on January 15 promoted Govorov to colonel general. On the night of January 16, the 18th Rifle Division stormed Poselok No. 5 three times. Intense fighting flared throughout the night, through bitter bone-chilling cold that dipped to 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.

From along the railway embankments of the peat works, a hail of accurate German

fire prevented the Soviet battalions from getting closer than 50 feet to the German positions. On the 17th, a Tiger tank drove north on the road to Shlisselburg in the vicinity of Poselok No. 5. It came under such heavy fire that it tried to turn but in the process got stuck in the peat bog beside the road. An antitank gun hit the thinner armor of its engine compartment, and the Tiger was knocked out.

Zhukov, who at the time was at Meretskov's headquarters, heard of the incident and immediately gave orders that the wreck be captured. By evening, while the Tiger was being towed out by the 18th Rifle Division, Soviet armor was blasting high explosives at the ruined buildings of Poselok No. 5. The Soviets and Germans were fighting for every house and every ruin.

The two regimental groups of the 61st Infantry Division along with 4th SS Police Division troopers held open the Soviet jaws so that their comrades of the 227th and the 96th Infantry Divisions and the 5th Mountain Division could escape encirclement to the north.

Nikolay Vasipov, a veteran of the Soviet 67th Army's 34th Ski Brigade, recounted the fierce fighting along the north-south road: “The trees were smashed and the air was thick with smoke from the burning peat. The Germans had constructed a road through the marshes. It was an inferno and I found it hard to ignore the cries of the wounded echoing through the smoke and the trees. It was hell on Earth.”

Fighting continued all night with various German combat groups fighting their way through the rapidly closing gap. On the morning of January 18, the Soviet jaws snapped shut near Poselok No. 1. An hour later, the 136th Rifle Division beat back a determined German counterattack and took Poselok No. 5.

In Leningrad, the rumor of a great Soviet victory spread like wildfire. Windows opened against the cold to proudly display flags. Gramophone music flowed from bombed-out apartments. Late on the night of January 18, 1943, Leningrad radio asked its listeners to stand by for a special message: “The ring has been burst open. We have long waited for this day, but we knew it must come. As we laid our dear ones to rest in the frozen ground of the mass graves, without ceremony, we swore an oath to them by way of a farewell: ‘The ring must be burst open!’”

Many more would perish on the frozen ground. On January 18, Shlisselburg fell to the 86th Rifle Division. Of the 15,000 people who lived there before the war only a few hundred remained. All the others had been shipped to Germany, died from hunger, or were executed by the Germans. Despite this, Vasipov remembers that the citizens of Shlisselburg would have preferred to remain under German occupation. Vasipov claims the remaining population was marched off to Leningrad and shot by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police.

On the same day that Shlisselburg fell, Lipka was secured by the 128th and 372nd Rifle Divisions. The Soviet divisions bore down on the remaining German units in the pocket, which were desperately trying to get out. Everyone was needed to hold back the two freshly reinforced Soviet fronts, which now turned south, intent on overwhelming Gorodok and Siniavino.

To stop them, Lindemann counted on General Carl Hilpert, who took command over all the German divisions between the River Neva and the River Volkhov, including the 4th SS Police Division; the 1st, 11th, 21st, 212th, and 223rd Infantry Divisions; and the 28th Jäger (light) Division. The 61st, 96th, 170th, and 227th Infantry Divisions, which had been heavily engaged since the beginning of the battle, all had to be disbanded due to heavy losses.

The SS Police Division and the 11th and 21st Infantry Divisions desperately sought to hold the Siniavino position. Throughout the day, Soviet mortar rounds and artillery shells bombarded the German lines on the Siniavino Heights. At night, in extreme cold, the 142nd Naval and 123rd Rifle Brigades charged again and again but could not overcome the German defenses. So strong were the German positions and so vulnerable the Soviet



Congratulating one another on the liberation of the town of Shisselburg in January 1943, Red Army soldiers embrace. Months of hard fighting still lay ahead for the Soviets in their drive to Berlin.

approaches through the marsh that General Nicolai Simoniak, the commander of the 136th Rifle Division, refused Zhukov's direct orders to join the attack.

"Trotskyite! Passive resister!" shouted Zhukov over a high-security line. "Who are those cowards of yours? Who doesn't want to fight?" Simoniak retorted that there were no cowards in the Sixty-seventh Army. Simoniak's pessimism proved correct as the Soviets were unable to capture the heights proper but did manage to fight their way two miles southwest to capture Poselok No. 6.

A more serious attempt to outflank the Siniavino Heights from the west failed when the 102nd Rifle and the 220th Tank Brigades and the 123rd Rifle Division were unable to overcome the German defenses at Gorodok. On the eastern extreme flank of the battle, Juschkat and his platoon of the 1st Infantry Division still held out at Gontovaia. For eight days, Juschkat and his men had repelled multiple Soviet attacks each day, coming at them from two sides. Finally, a pioneer company came up to lend support.

While Juschkat was able to get some rest, on January 21 Sergeant First Class Hans Bölter walked out of the field hospital to return to the battle. Saddened by the somber news of Gerdtehl's death, Bölter climbed back into a Tiger the next day. On a second day of reconnaissance, he happened upon a group of KV-1 tanks, destroying two and causing the rest to flee. From north and east of Gorodok to south of Poselok No. 6, along the Siniavino Heights east to Gontovaia Lipka, the German front held.

On January 31, the Soviets broke into Siniavino in a final violent effort but were thrown out by an 11th Infantry Division counterattack. Exhausted and drained, the Soviet attacks ended when Meretskov suspended the battle.

Although the final objective of Siniavino eluded them, the Soviets secured the all-important land corridor to Leningrad. They had captured Shlisselburg, Marino, Lipka, and Poselok Nos. 1-8. To acknowledge their success, the 136th and the 327th Rifle Divisions were designated as the 63rd and 64th Guards Rifle Divisions, respectively, and the 61st Tank Brigade became the 30th Guards Tank Brigade. The 61st Tank Brigade commander was promoted to colonel. Stalin promoted General Zhukov to marshal of the Soviet Union on the day Shlisselburg fell.

Characteristically, Zhukov's victory did not come cheap. Some 33,940 Soviet soldiers were dead, captured, or missing, and there were 81,142 wounded, a total of 115,082 casualties out of 302,800 troops engaged. Equipment losses were heavy as well, with the Sixty-seventh Army alone losing 225 tanks.

The Germans suffered at least 12,000 dead, considerably fewer than the Soviets, but these were losses the Eighteenth Army could ill afford. On January 31, a Wehrmacht communiqué formally acknowledged its defeat to the troops: "Between Lake Ilmen and the Gulf of Finland the Soviets have been able to gain more ground despite local defensive successes by our forces. The defensive fighting in this area is continuing with undiminished intensity."

Almost all of the German units had managed to fight their way out of the pocket, however, bringing with them 2,000 wounded; and very few Germans were taken prisoner. All the heavy equipment had to remain behind but was destroyed before it could fall into Soviet hands.

German tactical success could not obscure the Soviet strategic victory. Only a week after the end of the battle, the Soviets laid down a new rail line through the land corridor from Poliany to Shlisselburg. The bread rations shipped to Leningrad more than doubled. The days of starvation were over. However, because the corridor was only 5-6 miles wide, any Soviet communications and supply lines remained subject to German assaults and artillery strikes.

From their observation posts on the shell-cratered Siniavino Heights, the Germans could see all the way to Lake Ladoga. Operation Spark proved to be only the first phase of the Second Battle of Lake Ladoga, which would last until April as Stalin's northern armies readied themselves for the next great assault on the Third Reich's Army Group North.

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Although ultimately successful in liberating Novorossiysk, twin Soviet amphibious landings proved costly in February 1943. ■ BY VICTOR KAMENIR

THE YEAR 1943 began badly for the German Army on the Eastern Front. After a great struggle at Stalingrad, German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus surrendered himself and his Sixth Army on January 31. Powerful sledgehammer blows from the strengthening Red Army began to shudder the entire southern flank of the German Army.

In the Caucasus, the Soviet steamroller started clearing the Taman Peninsula to eliminate the German threat to the Caspian Sea oil fields. The key to securing the entire northeastern shore of the Black Sea was Novorossiysk, an important deep-sea port city held by the Germans since September 1942.

The goal of Soviet Operation Sea was to cut off and destroy German and Romanian forces operating in and near Novorossiysk. The German 17th Army defending this area was composed of both German and Romanian divisions. The Soviet 47th Army, from the North Caucasus Front under Gen-

eral I.E. Petrov, was to launch an overland assault from northeast of the city. Once the troops of the 47th Army breached the German defenses, the Soviet 18th Army, also from the North Caucasus Front, was to land its forces in the immediate vicinity of the city itself, on the Tsemess Bay.

With the German occupation of Sevastopol and Novorossiysk in 1942, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet had lost its primary naval bases. Its operations were shifted farther down the southeast coast to the city of Poti, whose port facilities were small and poorly equipped to serve as a naval base. An even smaller port, Gelendzhik, closer to Novorossiysk, picked up part of the workload. The recapture of Novorossiysk would provide the Soviet Black Sea Fleet with a base large enough to accommodate its naval forces.



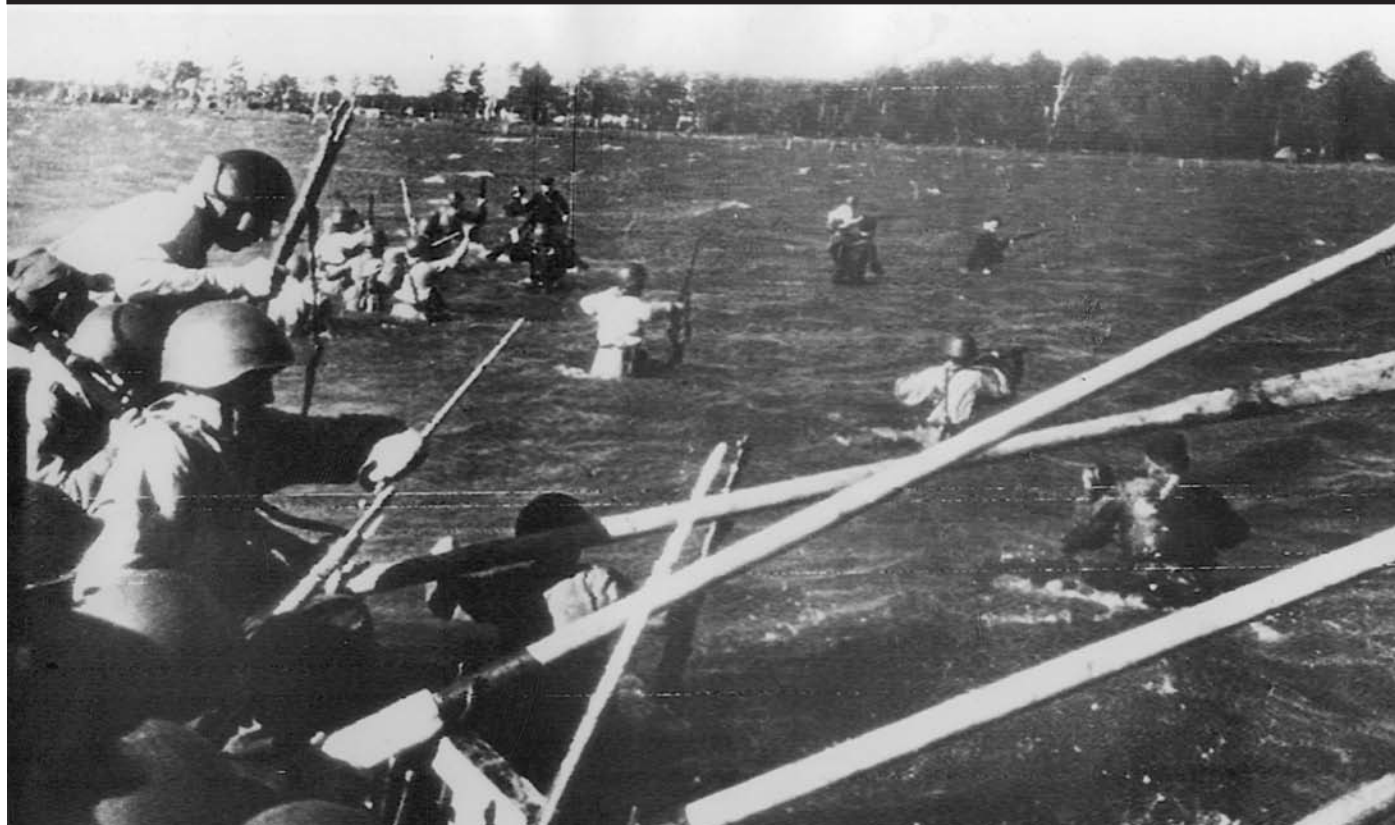
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SOVIET

Soldiers by Sea

Soviet marines, their faces grim with determination, man a trench on the forward edge of their defensive positions near Novorossiysk. Attached to the Northern Fleet, these men were part of an operation to retake the strategically vital Black Sea port from the Germans. INSET: Major General I.E. Petrov commanded the Soviet 47th Army in an overland drive against German-occupied Novorossiysk.



National Archives

Wading ashore from oar-driven barges called bolinders, Soviet marines assault German strong-points on the Black Sea coast.

The Soviet 47th Army launched its attacks northeast of the city on February 1, 1943. The spearhead was unable to breach German defensive lines and reach its objectives. To support the 47th, Petrov ordered the 18th Army to land its forces from the sea no later than February 4.

This amphibious assault was to be carried out in two locations. The main landing force was to come ashore in the vicinity of the village of South Ozereika. This force was composed of the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade, the 563rd Separate Tank Battalion, and supporting assets. South Ozereika is located southeast of Novorossiysk, and a Soviet force landed there would be a direct threat to German rear echelons.

A diversionary landing was to take place on Cape Khako on the western side of the Tsemess Bay, near Stanichka village, which was situated in the vicinity of Novorossiysk. The 250 men in this battalion task force came from the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade. The Black Sea Fleet, under Vice Admiral F.S. Oktyabrsky, was to transport the troops and provide covering bombardment. Oktyabrsky was in the overall command of the operation.

The armored fist of the primary assault, the 563rd Separate Tank Battalion, was formed in the summer of 1942. Initially, the battalion was equipped with British Valentine and American Stuart Lend-Lease tanks, but eventually became entirely equipped with M3A3 Stuarts.

The lack of appropriate landing craft was to play a key, and tragic, role in the operation. Instead of actual amphibious assault craft, the Soviets were forced to use bolinders, which were shallow-draft, self-propelled barges. These craft were named for a Swedish firm that had produced maritime commercial vessels in Russia before the 1917 revolution. At this time, three bolinders were in use by the Black Sea Fleet, but they could no longer move under their own power and were used as towed barges or temporary floating docks. These were the only tank-landing resources available for Operation Sea.

The plan called for 30 tanks to land in the first echelon at South Ozereika. After disembarking the tanks, the bolinders were to revert to their role as floating docks and receive troops disembarking from gunboats, trawlers, and transports, which could not get close to the beach due to their deeper draft.

The Soviet command realized that the success of the whole operation depended on the ability of these three ancient, dilapidated craft to get close to land. To ensure their survival, Soviet aviation and naval supporting bombardment were to provide cover for the landing. Small groups of minor combat vessels were to draw attention away from the landing group.

Embarkation began in the evening of February 3 in Gelendzhik, which was ill equipped to handle an operation of this size. The units participating in the operation did not have an opportunity to practice embarkation and quickly fell behind schedule. Miraculously, at 1940 hours, only 30 minutes late, the first echelon of the landing force began to get underway. The sea conditions were not taken into account in planning, and minor swells further slowed the tempo of the operation.

It immediately became apparent that the bolinders, heavily loaded with tanks, were creeping along at a much slower speed than was planned. Bolinders, even in their prime, were designed for in-shore work and they were completely inadequate to cross the open waters of the Tsemess Bay. The timetable began to fall further and further back. It was soon determined that the ground assault force was going to be one and a half hours behind schedule.

This meant that the assault troops would hit the beach well after the scheduled air and naval strikes and diversionary landing took place. Realizing that this meant the failure of the whole operation, the first wave commander, Captain 1st Rank (Captain) N.E. Basisty, requested that the operation commander, Vice Admiral Oktyabrsky, delay the diversionary landings and fire support by 90 minutes. Extreme inflexibility in decision-making and the strictest adherence to plans had plagued the upper echelons of the Soviet command throughout the war, so it is of little surprise that Oktyabrsky denied the request.

Heavy naval bombardment and air strikes began at 0045 and lasted over two hours. For the first time in naval warfare, several vessels had “Katyusha” multiple rocket launchers mounted on them. The naval bombardment was largely ineffective due to a lack of fire correction. It did succeed, however, in alerting the German and Romanian defenses.

In the weeks preceding the operation, numerous reconnaissance parties had landed on the beach. They had been spotted by the Germans and Romanians and the defenders were prepared for a possible amphibious landing.

At 0335 on February 4, six cutters packed with 300 naval infantrymen darted toward the Axis-occupied shore. The defenses came alive. The bulk of the defenders on this stretch of the shoreline were from the Romanian 10th Infantry Division. The Germans were represented in small but effective numbers of specialist troops, mainly field and antiaircraft artillery batteries and searchlight crews. Well-manned searchlights reached out and found the advancing Soviet craft, which immediately came under heavy artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire.

Two cutters were hit right away and one of them, SKA-051, exploded. The resulting losses cut the assault force by a third, with only 200 out of 300 men actually landing. The loss of SKA-051 was doubly significant because the commander of this spearhead force, Captain 3rd Rank (Lieutenant Commander) A.P. Ivanov, was killed, leaving the troops without effective command and control.

Since Ivanov was dead, there was no one to give the bolinders the signal to advance closer to the shore. Roughly half an hour after the landing began, the surviving naval infantrymen still were not able to suppress the German and Romanian fire. Their foothold on the beach was very tenuous. It is unknown who gave the bolinders the command to move in, but they began to creep forward. These vulnerable landing craft loaded with tanks represented a gunner’s dream: slow, fat targets. The German searchlights easily spotted the approaching bolinders.

Soviet marines prepare to embark on a raid against German positions. When Axis forces occupied Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, the Soviet Navy was deprived of a principal base.



Immediately, the bolinders came under fire. The very first hits on Bolinder No. 2 and its tugboat *Gelendzhik* caused serious damage and set the vessels on fire. Still over 200 meters away from the shore, both vessels began to sink. The 350 men on board—naval infantrymen and tank and vessel crews—were forced to jump into the freezing water and swim ashore under fire. All 10 tanks on board, a third of the total armored force, were lost.

The two remaining bolinders and their tugs continued to doggedly move toward the shore. A hundred meters from the shore, another bolinder ran aground on an underwater steel hedgehog obstacle. The barge began to rapidly settle to the bottom. Luckily, the tanks were able to begin disembarking due to the shallow depth at this location.

The immobile bolinder became a fixed target for Romanian mortars and was soon set ablaze. Despite desperate and heroic attempts by the crew to put out the fire, it spread rapidly. Soon the flames reached ammunition stored aboard and the bolinder exploded. Still, seven of the 10 tanks aboard were able to disembark and reach the shore. They immediately entered the fierce fight raging on land. The fight in the dark was at close quarters and often hand-to-hand.

The German searchlights, overhead flares, and the fires aboard the burning ships illuminated ample targets for the defenders, but the appearance of Soviet tanks on shore demoralized the Romanian soldiers.

At this time, a third bolinder, which had fallen behind on the approach, began its run at the shore. Both the bolinder and its tow-ship, the cutter SP-19, were hit. The tow cable was severed, and the barge began to turn and drift. Despite a fire raging aboard, the crew was able to maneuver the bolinder close to the shore, and some of the tanks began to unload. Others were engulfed by the flames.

The destruction of the bolinders and continuing fire from shore severely impeded the ability of the follow-up echelons to disembark their landing parties from the gunboats and trawlers. Several vessels kept trying to approach the shore until 0600, but each time they were met with a barrage of fire and were forced away with heavy loss of life. Only one battalion from the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade and some elements from the other two were able to land.

At 0620, fearing possible German air strikes, Basisty ordered the remaining ships to turn back to Gelendzhik. At this time, there were approximately a thousand men fighting on the beach-head. They were the survivors of the 563rd Separate Tank Battalion, elements of three battalions of the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade, and crews from sunken vessels. They did not have a single working radio among them. The brigade commander, Colonel A.S. Potapov, and his headquarters staff never had an opportunity to disembark.

Another significant flaw in Soviet planning then came to light. Despite numerous reconnaissance attempts of this area, the scouting parties failed to report that this section of the beach did not allow tanks any room to maneuver. The Stuarts were channeled onto a narrow rocky road covered by defensive positions. A number of Romanian mortars were deployed on the reverse slopes of nearby hills and were firing on presighted points on the shore.

While engaged in constant and confused fighting, the surviving Soviet officers began to slowly organize their men around them. At this time, the highest ranking officer on the beach was a Captain Kuzmin, commander of 142nd Naval Infantry Battalion. It is probable that he assumed command and began to coordinate actions with the surviving tanks to liquidate Romanian strongpoints. Crews from destroyed tanks picked up whatever weapons they could and joined the infantrymen.

Soon, the Soviet fighters found a weak spot in the Romanian defenses. The banks of the Ozereika River, flowing through a deep ravine, were not defended. A large group of naval infantrymen infiltrated around the Romanian right flank and hit them from the rear, in the direction of the village of South Ozereika.

Fearing all was lost, the commander of the German 164th Air Defense Battery blew up his two guns and retreated. Following his lead, Romanian infantrymen from the 53rd Infantry Regiment, 10th Infantry Division abandoned their positions en masse, leaving behind over 300 men killed, wounded, and taken prisoner. Russian casualties were heavy as well, with no more than 800 men and eight tanks still combat capable.

The survivors of the assault force had three bleak choices. The first was to defend their position on the shore and hope for a rescue. The second was to try to fight their way south to where they knew a diversionary landing was taking place. The third was to continue their mission and proceed to their secondary objective, the village of Glebovka. Without alternative orders and out of communication with higher command, the landing force continued its push inland.

BELOW: In the heat of combat, German soldiers crouch and fire their weapons feverishly from a trench line as Soviet marines advance against them. OPPOSITE: The operation to liberate the port city of Novorossiysk from its German and Romanian captors was to be a coordinated assault from both land and sea.



There were not sufficient German or Romanian troops in the immediate area to effectively stop this force, but they did put up a stiff resistance. Three out of eight Stuart tanks were destroyed by noon on the narrow road from South Ozereika to Glebovka. By the evening of February 4, the naval infantrymen reached Glebovka and captured its southern outskirts.

By this time, the Germans were able to concentrate one mountain infantry and one tank battalion and four artillery and two anti-aircraft batteries against the advancing Soviets. Romanian units were reformed and reoccupied their abandoned positions on the shore, effectively cutting off the Soviet landing force from possible extraction.

Two Soviet cutters were sent out from Gelendzhik after nightfall to reestablish communications with the troops stranded on the beach. After coming under fire from the Romanian forces, the ships returned to their base without any solid news. Throughout the next day, Soviet reconnaissance aviation reported that there was still fighting in the area. Vice Admiral Oktyabrsky decided not to land reinforcements or resupply and support the survivors by air. Instead, all available resources were shifted to the second landing site at Cape Khako, farther to the southeast. The men of the 255th and 563rd were now doomed.

Ammunition was running out and casualties were continually mounting. The remaining two tanks, out of cannon ammunition, were forced to use only their machine guns. In the last desperate stand to defend dugouts full of wounded, both tanks were hit and destroyed. By the end of the day, only about a hundred men were still able to fight.

That night, the remainder of the landing force split up. Captain Kuzmin and 75 men attempted to fight their way to Cape Khako, while the remaining 25 set off in the direction of Abrau, toward the coast. The latter were lucky; they made contact with partisans who had communications with the Soviet command and were soon evacuated by cutters. Twenty-two days after the landing, five men from the larger group made it to the Cape Khako beachhead. Neither Captain Kuzmin nor a single tank crewman were among them.

The events at Cape Khako unfolded quite differently. A diversionary force of 250 men landed on schedule in the vicinity of the small fishing village of Stanichka. Their purpose was to draw attention to themselves and away from the main landing at South Ozereika. Unofficially called *smertniki* (destined for death), they knew that there was little chance of their survival. Armed only with light infantry weapons, the men, led by Major Cesar L. Kunikov, were all volunteers from the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade. Cesar Kunikov was an experienced and capable officer, distinguished in prior actions on the Azov and Black Seas during 1941 and 1942. His men held him in the highest esteem. Legend has it that when Kunikov called for volunteers for his task force, he announced: "Who wants to go die with me?" More men than were needed stepped forward.

The attack was launched under cover of naval bombardment and air strikes. Several cutters lay down a smoke screen. As at South Ozereika, Katyusha rockets mounted on trawlers added their firepower to the effort. Several torpedo boats fired directly at port facilities and the quay. Even though they achieved surprise, Kunikov's men encountered heavy resistance from the very beginning. Fighting in the dark was in extremely close quarters, often hand-to-hand. Twice slightly wounded, Kunikov continued to lead his men from the front.

Soon, Kunikov was able to report by radio that a tiny strip of rocky shore was secure. Within



Map © 2015 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN

WHILE ENGAGED IN CONSTANT AND CONFUSED FIGHTING, THE SURVIVING SOVIET OFFICERS BEGAN TO SLOWLY ORGANIZE THEIR MEN AROUND THEM. AT THIS TIME, THE HIGHEST RANKING OFFICER ON THE BEACH WAS A CAPTAIN KUZMIN, COMMANDER OF 142ND NAVAL INFANTRY BATTALION.

hours, reinforcements diverted from South Ozereika were landed, bringing his force to approximately 800 men. Without allowing the Germans time to regroup, Kunikov launched an assault that resulted in the capture of a German artillery battery. This attack also succeeded in occupying several streets on the southern edge of Stanichka. The beachhead was now

expanded to an area four kilometers wide and two-and-a-half kilometers deep.

During the next three days, desperate for some success after the failure of the landing at South Ozereika, the Soviet command poured in reinforcements.

Kunikov's depleted force was pulled back to the water and tasked with organizing operations on the makeshift wharf: meeting and directing arriving reinforcements, weapons, and supplies, as well as evacuating wounded. On the night of February 12, Major Kunikov stepped on one of the German mines that still littered the beachhead and was seriously wounded in the groin. Had qualified medical help been readily available, he might have been saved, but by the time he was evacuated two days later, gangrene had set in. Kunikov died on February 14, shortly after arriving at Gelendzhik Hospital. He was posthumously made a Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest Soviet military recognition.

The overall command on the beach first passed to the commander of the 255th Naval Infantry Brigade, Colonel A.S. Potapov, fresh from the disaster at South Ozereika. Soviet forces on the beach rapidly expanded to a task force comprising the 255th and 83rd Naval Infantry Brigades as well as the 165th Infantry Brigade. Within days, General D.V. Gordeyev took over command of this task force from Potapov. He aggressively expanded operations, and by February 10 had captured the whole of Stanichka village and the 14 southernmost city blocks of Novorossiysk. The beachhead now extended to a 34-kilometer wide and seven-kilometer deep perimeter.

Despite desperate German efforts to liquidate the beachhead, Soviet forces continued to gain momentum. A total of four infantry brigades from the 16th Infantry Corps of the 18th Army and five partisan detachments were now operating south of Novorossiysk. By February 15, Soviet forces on the beachhead numbered over 17,000 men, 95 artillery and mortar pieces, and 850 machine guns. The strip of land captured by Kunikov's men became known as "the little land."

Heavy fighting continued. The area occupied by the Soviet forces was fully vis-

ible to the Germans deployed on the heights above the bay, so resupply and reinforcement could be carried out only at night. German air strikes and artillery fire were almost constant. Soviet reinforcements heading for the shore were attacked by German aircraft and long-range artillery while still on the water. Their naval vessels had to run the gauntlet of not only artillery and aircraft fire, but also mines dropped from German aircraft.

The lumber needed to construct bunkers and trenches was cut several kilometers from Gelendzhik, then tied onto rafts and towed to the beachhead behind navy cutters under the cover of darkness. Once under German attack, the rafts could neither maneuver nor get away from the fire. Their only option was to slowly plod on toward the shore. If a raft took a hit, the timbers would be pulled together as much as possible in order not to lose the precious cargo. If a towing cutter was hit, the crew would give a prearranged signal with rockets and wait in the water for rescue.

Vicious air combat was raging above the beachhead as well, with the Soviets slowly gaining air superiority. In some areas on the beachhead, the opposing trench lines were within a grenade's throw of each other. The Soviet soldiers would often line their front trenches with their white undershirts to make sure their own aircraft delivered their payloads to the right address. Soviet pilots shot down over Tsemess Bay who landed in the water would usually drown because they were not issued safety vests.

At night, combat engineers on both sides, either repairing or destroying defenses, often engaged in brutal hand-to-hand fighting. Even the term "night" was relative, due to the large number of flares and searchlights deployed by German forces.

After the war, future Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev wrote a book called *Malaya Zemlya (The Little Land)*. In it, he claimed to have been in the thick of the fighting on the beachhead. At the time, he was a commissar with the rank of colonel attached to the headquarters of the 18th Army. There were multiple and persistent rumors that his claims were wholly made up and the closest he got to the action was to tour the battlefield after Novorossiysk was liberated.

For a little over seven months, the Stanichka/ Cape Khako beachhead was a bleeding ulcer for the German 17th Army. The Germans continued to commit men and machines in attacks to liquidate the beachhead, pulling them away from other sectors of the front. On September 10, 1943, the Soviet forces of the North Caucasus Front launched their final attack on Novorossiysk. The three-pronged assault, from the north and east overland from the Stanichka/Cape Khako beachhead, along with another seaborne landing from Gelendzhik, was successful. On September 16, 1943, the city of Novorossiysk was once again in Soviet hands.

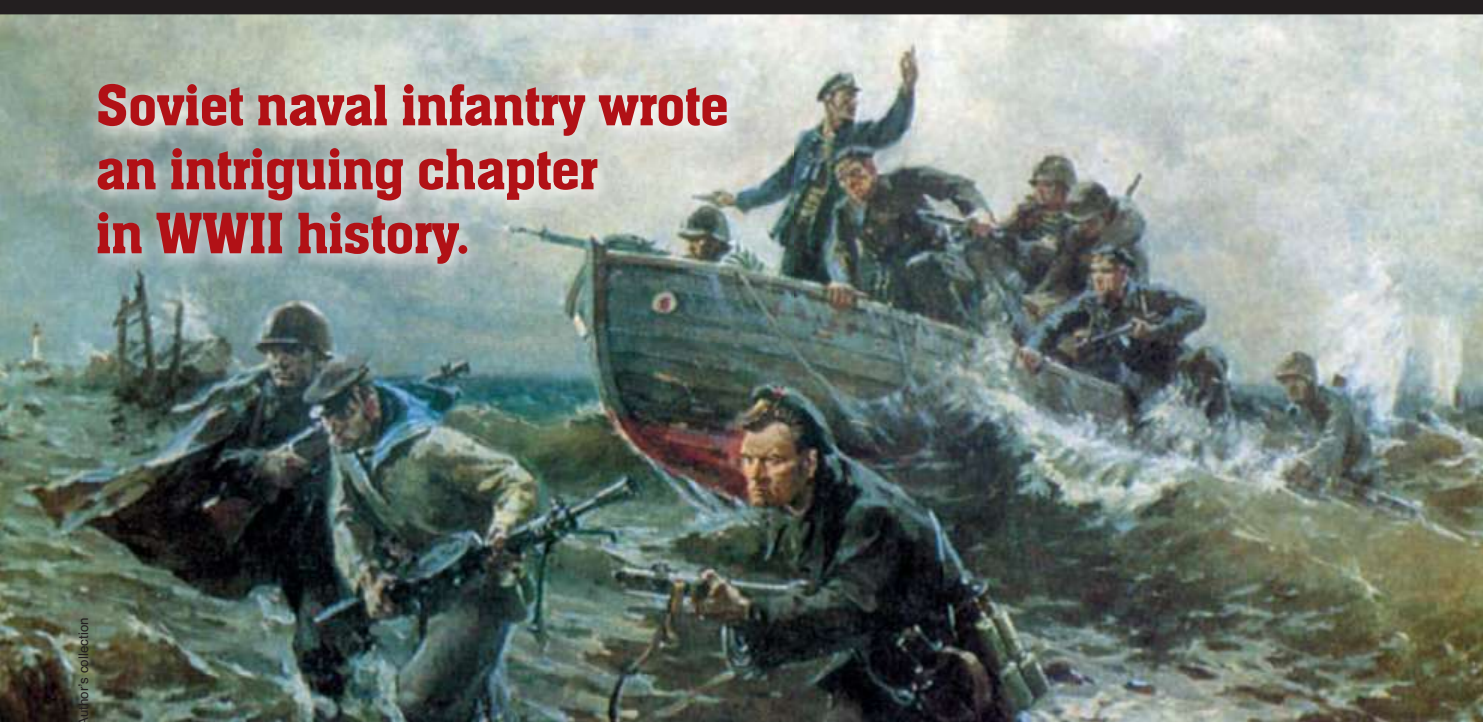
The price the Red Army paid for the liberation of the city was high, with 21,000 men killed on the Cape Khako beachhead alone. According to German sources, the Soviet casualties at South Ozereika amounted to 630 killed and 542 taken prisoner. Roughly 200 were presumed drowned during the landing. After the war, the landing at South Ozereika was supposedly taught at the Soviet military academies as an example of how *not* to conduct amphibious landings.

The rigidity of thinking coupled with inadequate and faulty planning on the part of Soviet commanders was nothing new. This circumstance plagued the Soviet military for much of World War II. A significant variable introduced into this equation for disaster was a lack of appropriate assets for an amphibious operation. The entire undertaking was staked on the performance of three inadequate landing craft.

The Soviet Union was far behind the United States in developing equipment and doctrine for amphibious operations. As usual, the Soviet rank and file, along with their junior commanders, picked up the tab, paying the bill with their blood.

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Soviet naval infantry wrote an intriguing chapter in WWII history.



In a somewhat romanticized painting by Viktor G. Puzirkov, Soviet marines storm ashore from landing craft. The Soviet Navy contributed 30 brigades of fighting troops to the effort to repel the Nazis during World War II.

AT the beginning of World War II, the Soviet armed forces possessed only one marine brigade, part of the Baltic Sea Fleet, and two separate marine companies, one each in the Danube and Pinsk Flotillas. These units were created in May 1940 as a result of lessons learned during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939. During this conflict, the Soviet military's need for amphibious operations was severely handicapped by the absence of appropriately trained marine forces backed up by mission-specific amphibious landing craft and equipment.

The first Soviet marine brigade was formed by reorganizing the Kronshtadt Fortress Garrison Regiment of the Baltic Sea Fleet. Even though this unit received some marine-specific training and wore distinctive black naval uniforms, it essentially remained a light infantry formation. The marine brigade lacked any landing craft or artillery; even its transport was horse-drawn.

From the outset of World War II, the Soviet Navy assumed a primarily defensive role. While the Black Sea Fleet often engaged Axis naval vessels, the majority of the Soviet Navy was used primarily in support of land operations, often as floating batteries firing at shore targets. This change of mission allowed the Soviet high command to transfer large numbers of surplus naval personnel, including people from naval academies and other training and command/control agencies, to fight as ordinary infantry.

Since there was no time to give the men the appropriate infantry training, they had to learn on the job. As one can imagine, such a mode of learning carried a heavy price tag. Very often, army officers commanded naval infantry brigades, with some army personnel dispersed through the ranks to give sailors assistance in learning their new duties.

Wearing their black uniforms, the sailors came to be called the "naval infantry." In the Russian language, the present-day Russian marines and World War II-vintage sailors-turned-infantry are both called naval infantry.

Among Marshall Georgi Zhukov's forces that halted the German advance on Moscow in the desperate winter of 1941 were four naval infantry brigades made up of personnel from the Pacific Fleet. Two brigades of naval infantry fought at Stalingrad. In the movie *Enemy at the Gates*, Russian sniper Vasiliy Zaytsev is portrayed as a brand-new Army recruit. By the start of World War II, the real Vasiliy Zaytsev had already served five years in the Soviet Pacific Fleet and held the rank of chief petty officer. He, along with many of his shipmates, volunteered for service at Stalingrad.

During the four years of war, the Soviet naval infantry participated in 122 amphibious operations. Ten of them were strategic-level operations, 99 were tactical, and 13 were diversionary.

It is virtually unknown that on the first day of the war, June 22, 1941, the marine company of the Danube Flotilla spearheaded a counter-attack into Romanian territory. For four days this marine company, a detachment of border guards, and an infantry regiment from the 25th Infantry Division held on to a large portion of the Romanian bank of the Danube. They were pulled back after their parent formation was threatened with encirclement by rapidly advancing German forces.

Overall, the Soviet Navy contributed almost 100,000 sailors to roughly 30 infantry brigades fighting on land. As the war progressed, these naval infantrymen were assimilated into regular Red Army formations. Reclothed in army uniforms, they retained their distinctive blue-striped jerseys. After the war ended, none of these men were returned to the Soviet Navy.

The concept of partisan warfare in Russia was nothing new in 1941. During Napoleon's invasion of the country in 1812, small bands of civilians harassed the French and their allies both before and after the retreat from Moscow. When the Kaiser's army struck in World War I, the Germans were forced to pull units from the front line to deal with partisan activity in the occupied areas.

Numerous bands of partisans were formed during the Russian Civil War. Red partisan detachments were particularly successful in Siberia, harassing the rear areas of the Whites and making a vital contribution to the communist fight in the Far East. The commander of the Urals Partisan Army, Vasilli Bliukher, was awarded the Order of the Red Banner for his leadership against the Whites. He was later beaten to death during the purges brought on by Soviet Premier Josef Stalin's paranoia.

After the Civil War ended, Soviet leaders continued to publish works on the organization and effectiveness of partisans. Lenin addressed the subject in some of his works, and Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky published several documents dealing with partisan tactics. He also addressed the subject of antipartisan operations, dealing with both how

Russian partisans took a heavy toll in German lives and tied down troops needed to fight the advancing Red Army during World War II.

to conduct them and how to counter them. Tukhachevsky was murdered on Stalin's orders in June 1937.

By the summer of 1941, a semidoctrinal mind-set concerning the spirit and usefulness of partisan warfare had become part of the psyche of many Soviet citizens. For Party fanatics, there was no question about civilian resistance

THE PARTISAN SCOURGE

BY PAT MCTAGGART

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After killing the German sentries who guarded this rail line, Soviet partisans plant mines. Partisan attacks were a constant worry for the Germans on the Eastern Front, 1942



to any enemy threat. A sense of duty to the communist system made the choice to fight automatic. For many others, it would take time to make the decision to fight.

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, began on June 22, 1941. Although a few Russian commanders had their men in forward prepared position, at the risk of their own necks, the majority adhered to Stalin's orders to do nothing to provoke the Germans. Stalin had disregarded information from several sources that pointed to a surprise attack, willing instead to believe that the non-aggression pact signed with Hitler in August 1939 would be good for at least another year.

The result of Stalin's stubbornness was a disaster for the Red Army. During the first six months of Barbarossa more than three million Soviet soldiers were captured or killed. Around Kiev, the figure was more than 600,000, while the defense of Smolensk cost the Red Army about 486,000 men. Another 300,000 prisoners were taken at Uman. The staggering figure of killed and captured astounded the Germans, who were not equipped to deal with the massive influx of enemy soldiers.

Successful as the German encirclements appeared to be, the lines around the trapped Soviet armies were often porous. Remnants of many divisions escaped eastward through gaps in the German positions. Other small groups and individuals disappeared into the marshes and forests that make up much of western Russia. Even if they were trapped behind enemy lines, those men continued the fight, forming the nucleus of early partisan units.

Although Moscow expected local Party leaders to form partisan units in the event of an invasion, actual preparations, such as stockpiling food and weapons, were woefully inadequate. The swift advance of the Wehrmacht through Western Russia also impeded any initial partisan formation because German forces were literally at the doorstep before many officials knew what was happening.

Another factor was the hostility directed against Moscow from many inhabitants of



ABOVE: Heavily armed Soviet partisans listen to a radio communique with instruction concerning their next foray against the Nazi invaders. **BELOW LEFT:** SS Lt. Gen. Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski battled the partisans. **BELOW RIGHT:** Soviet General V.I. Kusnetsov. 600 of his soldiers were rescued by partisans. **OPPOSITE:** Pouncing on unsuspecting German infantry, Soviet partisans unleash a hail of gunfire and hand grenades as they emerge from a treeline.

western Russia, especially in the Ukraine and former Polish territory. During the initial stage of the war, the Germans were treated as liberators in many areas, with the local populace only too ready to point out communist officials.

Despite these difficulties, from the beginning attempts were made to form a truly civilian partisan movement in some areas. More than a thousand Party members were left behind in Belorussia, and more were ordered to stay in various other areas that would soon fall into German hands. For the most part, these men were used to organize communications networks and find safe houses and other hiding places in which build up weapons caches for future use.

At the end of June, Moscow finally sent out an official directive to the nation. In a June 29 proclamation, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of People's Commissars directed local Party organizations to form partisan detachments and bring the war to the enemy. A mid-July order gave specific instructions on how the partisan groups should organize and what targets were priorities for destruction.

Detachments were to be composed of 75 to 150 men who were divided into two or three companies, and each company was subdivided into platoons. Large forested or swampy areas were deemed vital for cover and use for a base of operations, and care was given in explaining how to develop and distribute weapons caches. Instructions were given to make night raids on petroleum and ammunition dumps, railroad lines, airfields, and communication centers. Units were also told the best places to lay explosive charges and how to deal with attack, defense, and pursuit operations.

Once the Communist Party became engaged in the partisan movement, the vast Soviet bureaucracy kicked into gear. Committees were formed from the top levels of government down to local levels to regulate guerrilla activities. Powerful figures in the Party, the NKVD (secret police), and the Red Army vied for control of the partisan organization. The tactical and operational orders concerning partisan warfare finally ended up being



controlled by the notorious political chief and head of the Main Administration of Political Propaganda of the Army and NKVD, Lev Mekhlis.

Mekhlis had a bloody reputation earned during the purges of the 1930s. A favorite of Stalin, Mekhlis ruthlessly ordered the executions of officers and men whom he thought did not show proper aggressiveness during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940. Later in World War II, his meddling in military matters would cost the Red Army dearly in the Crimea and elsewhere, but his friendship with Stalin prevented him from ever receiving more than a slap on the wrist.

While Moscow struggled with organizational details, partisan units remained fairly passive throughout the summer and fall of 1941. Most of the active aggression came from detachments that had benefited from the influx of Red Army stragglers who found their way into the partisan camps. Experienced in weapons and tactics, the soldiers passed their knowledge on to the civilians in their group. It was these detachments that caused the first pinpricks to disrupt the lengthy German supply and communication lines.

Geography played a major role in early partisan actions. The vast forests and swamps in eastern Belorussia and the western Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic offered natural protection for units that would strike quickly before disappearing into the primitive countryside. German security units were reluctant to follow the partisans, preferring instead to stay close to the installations they were guarding. Those that did pursue were often on the receiving end of an ambush by unseen enemies.

One of the few partisan units that were able to organize effectively in those early days was a Belorussian detachment led by Mihay Filipovich Shmyrev. It was ironic that this man led one of the first successful groups since his combat experience consisted mainly of fighting anti-Soviet partisans during and after the Russian Civil War.

Shmyrev formed his detachment on July 9 with 23 men who worked in a small factory that he managed. Their first weapons came from Soviet soldiers who were fleeing from the advancing Germans. More recruits were gleaned from Red Army stragglers and local civilians who were drawn to the cause.

Their first offensive action came on July 25 when Shmyrev and a squad of his men ambushed some Germans who were bathing in a river, causing the enemy 25 to 35 casualties and suffering no losses to themselves. Subsequent ambushes in August were directed against light-skinned vehicle convoys and other soft targets.

The unit was soon acknowledged by Soviet officials, who sent 12 Red Army soldiers to reinforce Shmyrev in early September. Supplies followed in the form of four heavy machine guns with 15,000 rounds of ammunition and a light and a heavy mortar. Although some of his men deserted in the waning months of 1941, new recruits sought out the elusive Shmyrev, who now had the means to cause the Germans more than a little trouble throughout the rest of the year.

As the Wehrmacht moved deeper into the Soviet Union, partisan units were ordered to step up attacks on rail lines in the occupied territories. The road system in western Russia was in pitiful shape before the war started. German tanks and armored vehicles made a bad situation worse as they moved farther east, churning up the few good roads and making the rest all but impossible for the supply trucks that came after them.

The gauge for the Soviet rail system was different from that of Germany, and construction battalions followed the German advance, changing the rails so that Wehrmacht supplies could be moved quickly to the front on German-gauge

While Moscow struggled with organizational details, partisan units remained passive throughout the summer and fall.



rolling stock. It was slow going, however, even with conscripted labor from the conquered areas. Early partisan attempts to disrupt rail supply lines were not very successful, and damage was usually repaired in a day or two. Nevertheless, the farther east the Germans went, the more tenuous this vital network would become.

Another major function of partisan units in the first months of the war was to find straggling formations that had been bypassed by the Germans and were now behind the front. Many of these refugee soldiers were brought back to the Soviet lines. In October, some 800 soldiers were rescued from encirclement in the Poltava area,

As long as we were victorious, the area could be described as nearly pacified and almost free of partisans.



while another partisan group was able to rescue the 3rd Army's General V.I. Kuznetsov along with 600 of his men.

Early partisan activity, scattered as it was, provided Soviet propagandists with many stories designed to incite hatred for the Germans while promoting sacrifice for the Russian Motherland. Nothing tugs at the heart of a Russian more than a tragic or sentimental story, and communist propagandists knew how to appeal to the soul of the people, be they fervent Party members or secret anti-Stalinists. One such story centered on a young girl named Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya.

Born in 1923, Zoya joined a partisan unit in the autumn of 1941. She quickly adapted to the rigors of partisan warfare, helping lay mines and performing reconnaissance work. In November she volunteered to enter the village of Petrishevo, which had a German garrison, to reconnoiter and to cause any damage she could.

Zoya was captured a few days later and subjected to an interrogation that included severe beatings. According to a German sergeant who was present, the teenager remained silent during the entire process. Making no headway, the Germans marched her through the village half naked and hanged her. Zoya's mutilated body was left on the gallows for more than a month until the village was recaptured by the Red Army.

Word of the young girl's ordeal spread through occupied and unoccupied areas of the Soviet Union with lightning speed. Her story inspired patriotism that translated into a surge of volunteers for the partisan movement.

While the partisan movement struggled in its infancy, Mekhlis intervened with an order making political indoctrination of partisan volunteers a major priority. In some cases, potential partisan candidates were interviewed by NKVD teams that often turned away any volunteer that did not show proper communist zeal. Even as the Germans were approaching the gates of Moscow, Soviet political paranoia saw political reliability as more important than the necessity of defending the Russian Motherland with any means possible.

Overall, 1941 was a period for organizing the Russian partisan movement. Official Soviet histories claim that there were between 2,000 and 3,500 partisan detachments formed in the first six months of the war. No manpower figures are given, but even the number of detachments may be inflated due to the disorganization during these early months. A slow-moving Soviet bureaucracy, lack of weapons and concrete directions from Moscow, and the meddling of the Party resulted in a lack of action and semistagnation of the movement for the most part. That was soon to change.

One of the most important moments in Soviet partisan history came with the Red Army offensive in December 1941. Before then, much of the Soviet population in German-occupied Russia had either embraced the Germans as liberators (as it did in the Ukraine) or had just continued to struggle to survive, having traded one despot for another.

The Wehrmacht had seemed invincible in the summer and fall of 1941, and cries from Moscow to rise up against the invaders went largely unheard. Calls to fight for the Motherland, with little mention of the Communist Party, drew some recruits, but the physical presence of German soldiers and the vast panzer and motorized columns heading east were a great deterrent for any overt action.

When the Red Army struck during one of the coldest winters in a century, the population of the occupied territories suddenly saw a different German soldier. Cold, frightened, and hungry, the once victorious troops were now heading west as Soviet forces smashed their lines. Even German reinforcements moving toward the front had a look of uncertainty about them. This did not go unnoticed within the local population.

Another important aspect of the Winter Offensive was fear. In the early days of the war, Soviet propaganda warned of dire consequences for anyone collaborating with the enemy. This seemed unlikely as the Germans advanced on every front. Although modern communication between the towns and villages of western Russia was almost nonexistent,



ABOVE: Advancing toward the smoldering ruins of a Russian village, German soldiers prepare to search the remains of buildings for evidence of partisan activity. The German troops were encouraged to act brutally against the civilian population. **OPPOSITE:** Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya hangs lifeless after being executed by the Germans in reprisal for partisan attacks.

the Russian peasants were kept abreast of events by the age-old method of word-of-mouth. News of the great encirclements of July and August spread from town to town, making it all the more difficult for Moscow to mask the seemingly devastating defeats that plagued the Red Army in those early months.

In December, that same primitive communication system began spreading word of Germany's retreat. The propagandist's cry of "The Red Army Is on the Way" now seemed to be a real possibility, causing many to rethink their earlier positions. Everyone remembered Stalin's starvation and obliteration of the Kulaks after he took power, and the civilian and military purges of during the "Terror" of the 1930s were still fresh in people's minds.

Straddling the fence was no longer an option as word spread of the early Soviet victories in December. For many it was time to act because everyone knew that Stalin's revenge would be terrible and swift. Reports from German rear-area commanders revealed a growing concern over increasing partisan activity.

On December 14, Heeresgruppe Mitte (Army Group Center) received a communiqué from one of its Korücks (Kommandant Rückwärtiges Armeegebeit—Commandant of an army rear area) stating: "As the Russians have become more active on the front, partisan activity has increased. The troops left to this command are just sufficient to protect the most important installations and, to a certain extent, the railroads and highways. For anti-partisan operations there are no longer any troops on hand. Therefore, it is expected that soon the partisans will join together into larger bands and carry out attacks on our guard posts. Their increased freedom of movement will also lead to partisans spreading terror among the people, who will be forced to stop supporting us and will then no longer carry out the orders of the military government authority."

Another Korück reported: "The situation in the Army rear area has undergone a fundamental change. As long as we were victorious, the area could be described as nearly pacified and almost free of partisans, and the local population without exception stood

on our side. Now the people are no longer as convinced as they were before of our power and strength. New partisan bands have made their way into our territory, and parachutists have been sent in to assume the leadership of bands, assemble the civilians suitable for service along with the partisans who up to now have not been active, the escaped prisoners-of-war and the Soviet soldiers who have been released from military hospitals."

It may be well to look at German rear-area security measures as partisan activity increased. Each field army had at least one Korück who was responsible for the security of a particular sector in the Army's rear area. Sicherheits Divisionen (security divisions) were allocated to help guard rear areas and to participate in anti-partisan operations. These divisions had an infantry "Alarm" (alert) regiment composed of three battalions, a Landeschützen (regional defense) regiment of three to four battalions, and a guard battalion.

The Korück could also call on police units and independent SS battalions. Local volunteers (Osttruppen), especially in the Ukraine and Baltic States, were formed into battalion-size units to augment the German forces. These units were noted for their "no holds barred" approach to fight-

ing the partisans, and the war behind the lines soon took on a particular savagery of its own in which prisoners were rarely taken by either side. As the partisan movement grew, rear-area security would cause a continuous drain on Germany and its allies' manpower.

Small partisan actions during the offensive sometimes led to huge results. As the Germans retreated in the face of the Soviet onslaught, a partisan demolition group led by A. Andrianov destroyed one of the few remaining bridges across the Sestra River, creating a massive bottleneck on the east side of the river. The Red Air Force was notified, and in a large-scale attack Soviet aircraft destroyed approximately a hundred vehicles before the Germans could find alternate routes to the west.

If 1941 was a time of building for Soviet partisans, 1942 was a time of expansion and action. An example of increased operations against German supply lines took place about 15 miles east of Bryansk. On its own initiative, a German railway construction company started repairing a length of damaged track. Although the company was supposed to provide its own security, it proved inadequate when the partisans struck.

Communications between the company and its local headquarters suddenly ceased, and patrols were sent out to investigate. When a patrol finally stumbled upon the construction site, all it found were dead Germans. The entire company had been wiped out, and the partisans were long gone. No additional forces were available for security, so repair of the tracks was halted, depriving the Germans of an important supply line to the front.

In 1942, Moscow stepped up its control of partisan organizations, placing local units under regional commanders. Ten detachments in the Smolensk sector, for example, were centralized into a larger unit code-named "Batia." Overall, Batia had more than 5,000 members, which made it able to fight regular battles with German security forces.

As the partisan movement gained impetus, more resources were relegated to the

organization. Units were supplied with military communications equipment, and special radio channels were set aside specifically for partisan radio traffic. The Red Air Force at first dropped weapons and supplies by parachute, but by 1942 the larger partisan detachments had built airstrips in the forbidding forests and marshes that they called home.

Perfectly camouflaged, the airstrips were nearly invisible from the air, and the Red Air Force performed most of its supply operations at night with the partisans clearing away camouflage and lighting the airstrips with small fires set along the runway. Hand-picked partisans were also flown out of the occupied areas and were sent to a special school where they were given advanced training before flying back to their units.

Real cooperation with the Red Army began in earnest in 1942. The Winter Offensive had allowed Soviet units to push the Germans back more than 100 kilometers in some sectors of the front. During the retreat, partisan units harassed the Wehrmacht, cutting routes of withdrawal and leading Soviet assault units through supposedly impassable terrain to cut off and ambush the enemy.

The Soviet supply system became hopelessly overloaded in January 1942 as the result of the rapid advance. As the Winter Offensive stalled against determined German resistance, partisan units helped overextended Russian forces make their way back to their own lines.

Psychologically, the partisan movement far exceeded its actual accomplishments during the first winter of the war. Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, the commander of Heeresgruppe Mitte, reported, "The steady increase in numbers of enemy troops behind our front and the concomitant growth of the partisan movement in the entire rear area are taking such a threatening turn that I am compelled to point out this danger in all seriousness."

He went on to mention the cooperation with the Red Army and pointed out that the partisans were becoming bolder, causing disruption of communications and diverting troops needed at the front. The real problem, however, was the uneasiness among the troops, not knowing where or how the partisans would hit next. Anxiety among German forces moving at night along the few passable roads caused depression and insomnia that sharply decreased their effectiveness when they got to the front lines.

Von Kluge was correct in one important area. From June 22, 1941, to November 6, 1942, the German Army had sustained more than 650,000 casualties. By the beginning of April 1942, another 900,000 casualties from all causes were incurred. Even with replacements and returning wounded, the Army was about 600,000 men short. This led to a realignment of security forces that left many of the smaller bridges and crossings behind the front completely unguarded.

The partisans were quick to react to the situation, demolishing numerous bridges and causing more supply headaches for the Germans. Frustrated, the German High Command called for security formations from its Axis partners to help with the problem. More pro-German local forces were also employed in antipartisan operations.

One of the most vicious antipartisan units was commanded by Bronislav Kaminski, an engineer of Polish extraction and a radical anti-communist. Kaminski had a force of about 1,500 men when the Germans encountered him during the Winter Offensive in a heavily partisan-infested area in the Bryansk sector.

Fighting under the emblem of the Tsarist St. George's Cross, Kaminski carved out his own kingdom in the area, and by 1942 he had more than 9,000 men serving under him. The Germans had been unable to make any headway against partisans in the area, so they granted him a semiautonomous status in return for keeping up the pressure on the partisans.

Kaminski and his men were known for their extreme cruelty and ruthlessness. Partisan and nonpartisan villages alike were destroyed in the region, their citizens massacred under his reign of terror. Rape and plunder were the orders of the day as his men moved

through the countryside, and even the German SS units operating in the area were appalled by the actions of the Kaminski Brigade. Kaminski was finally executed in 1944 on the orders of SS Lt. Gen. Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski.

Despite antipartisan activities like Kaminski's, the movement kept growing. Working in cooperation with the Red Army and on their own, partisan forces continued to destroy German vehicles and communications lines. Some units even liberated towns held by enemy garrisons, which usually meant immediate execution for any surviving German soldiers.

An example of the growth of partisan effectiveness can be found in statistics kept for the winter of 1941-1942. More than 1,800 German vehicles were destroyed, as were 650 bridges. Attacks against German rail lines resulted in the derailing of 225 trains.

Although the Germans had basically stabilized the main front by May, there were still formations of Soviet troops left behind the lines, cut off since the Winter Offensive. One of the largest was in the Bryansk-Smolensk-Vyazma triangle. Major General P.A. Belov and the remnants of his 1st Guards Cavalry Corps formed the nucleus of a group that also contained parachute troops and the survivors of the 33rd Army.

Working closely with partisan detachments, Belov's forces struck weak points behind the German

lines. The partisans provided vital information concerning German troop movements and strength, allowing Belov to hit the enemy at his most vulnerable positions before melting back into the countryside.

By mid-May, the Germans had taken enough. A two-pronged attack, code-named "Hannover," was planned to eliminate the threat from Belov once and for all. A force of three panzer divisions, three infantry divisions, and one security division began the operation on May 24. Bridges destroyed by partisans hampered the attack as the Germans were forced to wait for engineers to replace the structures before they could cross the swollen streams and rivers in the area. Other partisan units shadowed the attackers, keeping Belov informed of the advance and allowing him to pull his forces out of harm's way.

When the German prongs met on May 27, Berlin claimed about 2,000 prisoners taken and another 1,500 Russians killed. It was not the result that had been expected. Belov still had about 17,000 men in his command, but he knew that his time was running out. He decided to break through to the Russian lines using partisan guides to travel from one partisan-controlled area to another.

The Luftwaffe finally spotted the columns of Soviet troops, but by the time ground forces closed Belov and his men were already making their way through a densely forested area controlled by the Lazo Partisan Regiment. The Germans refused to follow for fear of well-laid partisan ambushes.

Finally reaching the front, Belov organized his men and ordered an attack. A fierce fight developed, but Belov claimed that he brought at least 10,000 men to safety, even though he was flown out before the attack commenced. Thanks to



During a respite from fighting with Germans in Poland, Soviet partisans find temporary rest at their woodland encampment, 1944.

National Archives

partisan efforts, a large body of well-trained Soviet troops had been saved to fight another day while several German divisions needed at the front had been forced to deploy behind the lines in an effort to capture them.

The late spring muddy season gave the partisan units a chance to regroup. It had been a bloody winter for all involved in the savage fighting. Strength reports reaching Moscow showed a loss of about 20,000 partisans due to all causes. Official Soviet estimates give a total of about 70,000 effective partisan fighters operating in the spring of 1942. By the end of summer, that number had risen to about 125,000.

An important change in the partisan organization came in May 1942. Incompetence had its limits, even within the rigid Soviet bureaucracy. Although Stalin had ordered that a central staff be set up to control partisan activities in July 1941, Mekhlis and his boss, NKVD Chief Lavrenti Beria, continued to control the movement. That control was finally wrested from the NKVD when P.K. Ponomarenko became Chief of the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement on May 30.

Retreating German troops and armored vehicles press Russian civilians and livestock, which were caught up in their path.

The change effectively removed control of the partisans from the Party and moved it toward closer cooperation with the military. Attached to the Headquarters of the Supreme Commander (Stalin), Ponomarenko soon had staff personnel at several front and theater headquarters, working closely with the Army commanders to control partisan activities in their respective sectors.

Hitler's thrust toward Stalingrad began about the same time that Ponomarenko assumed his new position. The German advance brought new areas under occupation and also provided the Wehrmacht with new antipartisan forces. The German Army showed remarkable tolerance toward most of the tribes they encountered while advancing across the steppes and into the Caucasus and was rewarded with a flood of volunteers from various ethnic groups in the area.

Don, Kuban, Terek, and Siberian Cossacks were formed into legions to fight the Soviets and to protect the precarious German supply routes. Thousands of Armenians, Azerbaidjanis, Georgians, and North Caucasians also joined German forces, as did the Kalmucks, a Mongolian nomadic people living west of the Volga River and northwest



of the Caspian Sea. It is interesting to note that many of these tribes were Muslim or, in the case of the Kalmucks, Buddhist, and that the Wehrmacht took great care in providing each group with its own religious leaders or chaplains.

Most of these ethnic groups had been tyrannized by Stalin and the communist system, and they fought ruthlessly against Soviet partisan units being formed in the newly occupied areas. In the final years of World War II, they followed the retreating Germans westward. Most were handed over to the Soviets by American and British forces to be executed outright or to be sent to the Gulags to die.

The length of the German communications and supply lines all along the front made them prime targets, and partisan forces were once again ordered to concentrate on disrupting them. In the summer and fall of 1942, demolition squads carried out numerous attacks against fuel and supply depots and the German railway network far to the rear of the front. Hundreds of railway and highway bridges were destroyed, and more than 300 trains were derailed between June and November.

German forces reacted with more antipartisan operations. In actions such as Vogelsang (Bird Song), which took place north of Bryansk, German armored and infantry units scoured a 19,000-square-kilometer area in an attempt to root out and destroy their elusive quarry.

A maze of forest trails bounded by almost impenetrable brush and forests gave the partisans ample opportunity to ambush the Germans at almost every turn. Lasting about a month, Vogelsang netted about 500 presumed partisan prisoners with another 1,200 killed, a rather poor showing for such an operation. The strain of the fighting can clearly be seen in vintage photos of the German troops taking part in the action.

German antipartisan operations may have hurt the Russian guerrillas, but did not stop them from continuing their attacks. The German rail system was still one of the partisans' prime targets. From May to November, trains were derailed in the Leningrad sector. Between June and October, partisans in the Smolensk sector derailed more than 300 trains and another 226 were lost in the Bryansk sector. In Belorussia, more than 800 trains were derailed between June and November.

Hundreds of railway bridges were also destroyed during the last half of 1942. The Germans, already stretched to the limit at the main front, were forced to pull out more divisions to deal with the partisans. By the end of the year, 10 percent of the German field divisions on the Eastern Front had been switched from fighting the Red Army to performing antipartisan duties.

As 1942 waned, word of the impending disaster at Stalingrad spread across the occupied regions to Germans and Russians alike. German morale, especially in the supposedly secure areas, began to suffer. The news, coupled with the increased partisan activities along the supply routes, had a depressing psychological effect on troops in the town and village garrisons tasked with guarding bridges and railway lines.

Another important effect of partisan activity in the last months of 1942 was a decrease in food supplies received by the Germans from the occupied areas. As partisan detachments became bolder, villages that had once furnished meat and grain for the Wehrmacht supply organization showed a dramatic drop in production, making it more difficult for the Germans to live off the land.

Partisan units began entering the populated areas, taking what they needed and destroying the rest. Entire village populations were coerced into leaving their homes to seek sanctuary in the forests so that the fruits of their labor would not feed the hated Germans. Some left for patriotic reasons, while others left at the point of a gun. Assassins, targeting villagers who had become too friendly with the enemy, were also used by the partisans to increase tensions between occupation forces and the local population.

Korücks, under increasing pressure to pacify their respective sectors, pleaded with Berlin for more troops, but there were none to be had. With the impending loss of the Sixth Army

at Stalingrad, the pleas fell on deaf ears. In desperation, more Ostruppen battalions were raised, but the quality of the men reporting for duty made them a questionable deterrent.

With the deteriorating military situation and the increase in partisan strength, the German High Command appointed SS Lt. Gen. Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski to the position of Chief of Anti-Partisan Forces in December. The 43-year-old von dem Bach had served in World War I, where he earned both classes of the Iron Cross. He had served as the senior SS and Police Leader in the rear area of Heeresgruppe Mitte since June 1941.

An avid National Socialist, von dem Bach had been forced to resign from the Reichswehr (the post-World War I German Army) for participating in National Socialist politics. He found a new home in Heinrich Himmler's SS, where he became an SS organizer on the Austrian frontier. Rising rapidly in the organization, he proved his ruthlessness during the June 30, 1934, blood purge of the SA, or storm troopers, known as the Night of the Long Knives when he ordered a rival SS officer, Anton Freiherr von Hohberg un Buchwald, assassinated.

When the Germans entered the Soviet Union, von dem Bach oversaw the Einsatzgruppen murder squads that followed in the wake of Heeresgruppe Mitte. As a result of those activities, he suffered a nervous breakdown, liver congestion, nightmares, and hallucinations that had to be treated by specialists at an SS hospital in Germany. After being declared fit to return to service, he resumed his duties until assuming his new post.

With von dem Bach's appointment, the partisan war entered a new era of savagery. Partisan leaders already knew of his reputation, and the various formations steeled themselves to face their new enemy. This was especially true of the Jewish partisan units that often had to fight a two-front war against both the Germans and the animosity of the Russian people.

There was a marked difference between the Jewish and non-Jewish partisan units. The non-Jewish partisans fought because

of patriotic or communistic motives and could rely on the local population to give them supplies. Most fought knowing that their families, no matter what hardships they faced, would more than likely survive the war and that they would be reunited with their loved ones once the occupied territories were liberated by the Red Army.

Not so the Jews. Those lucky enough to escape into the forest knew that most would never see their families again. Many had witnessed firsthand the slaughter of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen, and those who hadn't soon learned the truth. The Jewish partisans were not only fighting for their country, they were fighting for revenge.

Most Jewish partisan units received little help from the peasant population, which often hated Jews more than they hated the Germans. Nevertheless, they won grudging admiration from other partisan units for their daring raids against German targets. In Belorussia, a unit commanded by the Bielski brothers grew to include about 1,200 fighters, while another unit, led by Shalom Zurnin, had about 800 Jews.

Whether Jewish or non-Jewish, Russian partisan groups continued to grow in size during the first half of 1943. The spring

kommando units infiltrated into the forests and swamps that contained partisan bases and stayed for extended periods of time.

They moved mostly by night, looking for any well-traveled path or trail that might be used by partisan forces. Living off the land, they were able to set up ambushes along those trails. The ambushes sometimes caused severe casualties to small partisan formations, but it was not enough to stop the recruitment of more Soviet locals, who easily replaced the Russian losses.

In the spring of 1943, Adolf Hitler was planning a battle designed to annihilate Soviet armies deployed in a huge salient in the Kursk sector. Massive amounts of men and equipment were sent to the area in preparation for the battle.

The Soviets were well aware of Hitler's plans. Their own espionage system was privy to many details of the operation, and partisan sources kept the Red Army up to date on enemy troop movements and dispositions. Hitler kept postponing the offensive, code-named "Citadel," so that even more divisions could be moved in for the attack.

German commanders grew more worried about the delays and the effects that partisan units in their rear might have on the operation once it finally got going. With postponement following postponement, the Army decided to use some of its field divisions scheduled for the offensive to secure, if only temporarily, the rail lines bringing vital supplies to the attack forces. Their mission was to eliminate as many partisan groups as possible in the weeks before the offensive, which was finally rescheduled for July 5.

Battle-hardened infantry and panzer units swept the Bryansk sector in several operations throughout May and June. The partisans took some fairly heavy casualties in German operations such as Osterei, Freischutz, Tannhauser, and Ziegeunerbaron, but the units still managed to keep their cohesion. For the most part, surviving partisans melted into the marshes and forests to reform and integrate new recruits for the upcoming battle.

In addition to the military preparations for the coming German offensive, STAVKA (Soviet High Command) issued specific instructions to the Central Headquarters for the Partisan Movement to conduct large-scale actions against the enemy rail network. The Red Army planned a counteroffensive once the German attack had run its course, and the disruption of the German supply network was seen to be an instrumental part of the operation if it were to succeed.

Citadel began with some initial success, but on July 13, Hitler, nervous about the Allied invasion of Sicily, decided to call off the offensive. He ordered key SS panzer divisions to disengage and head to the Mediterranean Front. Both sides had suffered massive losses during the nine-day battle, but the Soviets had a powerful reserve behind the front line ready to strike when the time was right.

The Russian counteroffensive began on July 17 with the Southwest and South Fronts attacking the flank of Heeresgruppe Süd. Heavy rains gave the German divisions of Heeresgruppe Mitte a break from the Russian offensive—the Soviets unable to attack or advance due to mud. The Heeresgruppe commander, Col. Gen. Walter Model, told Hitler in no uncertain terms that his armies would have to withdraw to shorten the line. For once, Hitler agreed and the divisions of the Heeresgruppe began moving westward on August 1.

The partisan operation was code-named "Rail War." During June and July, even as the battle at Kursk raged, ammunition, weapons, explosives, and demolition experts were flown into partisan bases in preparation for the massive venture. In Belorussia alone, 123 partisan units were detailed for demolition activities. Each unit was subdivided into demolition squads that were assigned specific sections of track to blow up. In the northern and central sectors of the front, between 200,000 and 300,000 sections were targeted to be destroyed.

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muddy season brought a welcome respite from combat, and the lull was used to train new recruits and to accumulate supplies and ammunition.

In an effort to counteract the increasing danger posed by the partisans, von dem Bach ordered the creation of the Jagdkommando (Hunter Commando) in early 1943. These were independent units, usually of company strength, designed to attack the partisans in their own element. The Jagd-

Heeresgruppe Mitte a break from the Russian offensive—the Soviets unable to attack or advance due to mud. The Heeresgruppe commander, Col. Gen. Walter Model, told Hitler in no uncertain terms that his armies would have to withdraw to shorten the line. For once, Hitler agreed and the divisions of the Heeresgruppe began moving westward on August 1.

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Hard-riding Cossacks gallop across a steppe strewn with the wreckage of war as they head toward the German lines. The threat of partisan activity forced the Germans to keep large numbers of troops behind the lines to guard supply routes and installations.

Preliminary attacks took place in late July with the Soviet counteroffensive now in full swing. Partisan units succeeded in blocking a main rail artery south of Bryansk for two days, and by the end of the month the Germans reported more than 1,100 separate attacks on railways in the central sector.

As the divisions of Heeresgruppe Mitte began their August 1 withdrawal, all partisan units scheduled to participate in Rail War were placed on alert. They moved out to pre-arranged sectors and waited for the command to strike. The order came on August 3, just as the Germans were in the midst of their withdrawal.

During the nights of August 3 and 4, Heeresgruppe Mitte reported more than 4,100 railway demolitions. It was the same in other sectors of the front. In all, Heeresgruppen Nord, Mitte, and Süd had a combined total of 262 kilometers of tracks destroyed. Supply trains heading toward the front were derailed by the attacks, backing up rail traffic and turning German logistics at the front into a nightmare.

Without the necessary supplies and ammunition, Model's Heeresgruppe Mitte was hard pressed to hold its new positions, which were being attacked by three Red Army Fronts. German repair battalions were sent out to restore the most vital sections of

track, requiring more units to guard the workmen—men that were sorely needed at the front.

In the Pinsk district of Belorussia, the Germans worked from early August until September 19 to repair sections of track that had been destroyed by the Imeni Lenina (In the Name of Lenin) Partisan Brigade. German trains were able to use the tracks for exactly one day before the brigade struck again. It was mid-October before the tracks could finally become operational once more.

The attacks continued up and down the front. In the Odessa sector in southern Russia, the 2nd Partisan Brigade, commanded by S. Kaplun, severed the Sarany-Luminets rail line, preventing its use from August 15 until October 19. The 3rd Partisan Brigade,

operating behind the lines of Heeresgruppe Nord, claimed that it blew up 10,000 sections of track in August alone.

Despite the kilometers of track destroyed, the Soviet authorities in Moscow were somewhat disappointed with the August effort. Communist officials had demanded many more attacks than had actually been carried out, oblivious of the logistical requirements facing the partisan units. In reality, the partisans had done everything they could to help the Soviet offensive.

Their efforts were recognized after the war by Hero of the Soviet Union Marshal Georgi Zhukov. In his memoirs, he praised the partisan fighters, stating that they “contributed significantly to Red Army victories in the summer of 1943 at Belgorod, Orel and Kharkov.”

The partisan operation also had the effect of attracting thousands of new recruits. Soviet figures, which should often be taken somewhat skeptically, estimate a 250 percent increase in partisan fighters compared to the end of 1942. Even if the figure is inflated, there is no doubt that partisan units saw a significant increase in volunteers during the last half of 1943.

With its increased strength, the partisan movement continued to be a drain on German manpower. In the Nevel sector of Heeresgruppe Nord, partisans partially or fully controlled a 3,200-square-kilometer area of swamps and forests. Working with Party members, the partisans reestablished the collective farm system there and were even able to implement a crude postal system to communicate with officials in the unoccupied areas of Russia.

The Crimea also had its share of partisans that kept German and Romanian occupation troops on guard and on edge. A force of up to 8,000 fighters occupied key areas in the Yaila Mountains, disrupting supply routes and attacking German garrisons in the vicinity. Their operations became so troublesome that the Romanian Mountain Corps was ordered to wipe them out in late December 1943. In a week-long action, the Romanians claimed to have killed more than 1,000 partisans and captured more than 2,500 at a cost of 232 casualties to

themselves. The surviving partisans melted away, forming new units to continue harassing the Germans and their allies.

In the early days of 1944, the Soviets launched two offensives—one against Heeresgruppe Süd and the other against Heeresgruppe Nord. The southern operation tore into the German line from Kirovograd to Korosten, forcing the Wehrmacht back more than 150 kilometers in some places. In the southern region of the Pripyat Marsh, partisan bands demolished the few rail lines in the area, totally disrupting the German supply network.

As the Soviets advanced, the partisans moved farther westward to set up new camps from which they could strike the enemy rear. More volunteers flocked to the cause, and German reports estimated that four partisan units with a combined total of nearly 9,000 men were operating in the rear of the Fourth Panzer Army, which was defending the sector directly south of the marsh.

The Red Army advance in the south slowly pushed the Germans back. By mid-April, the Russians had driven into Romania and were fast approaching the borders of Poland and Hungary. Once again, Soviet troops were helped by partisan units that derailed supply trains and demolished vital bridges that created choke points for German supplies and reinforcements struggling to reach the front.

In the north, the Russians launched an offensive aimed at breaking the siege of Leningrad and destroying the thinly stretched divisions of Heeresgruppe Nord. The offensive began on January 14 with thousands of shells slamming into the German positions. Tank and infantry units followed closely on the heels of the initial bombardment, breaking through the German front in several sectors.

Partisan units in the north were ordered to wait until the assault was in full swing before making their own attacks. The hard-pressed Germans, seeing no partisan activity in the rear area, released some security divisions and sent them to the front to try and stem the Russian tide.

As the offensive developed, the partisans were put into action, striking key communications and supply networks. The security units heading to the front were also attacked as their columns moved through the open countryside.

By January 16, the partisan attacks were in full swing in the north. Near Luga, a critical rail station and switching point was destroyed with heavy loss to the defenders. The main rail line supplying the XXXVIII Army Corps, which was desperately defending the Lake Ilmen sector, was blown up in more than 300 places. As the Red Army advanced, partisan attacks further to the west delayed the arrival of reinforcements desperately trying to reach the front.

The northern and southern offensives rolled forward until the spring rains turned the land into a vast quagmire. Both sides had suffered heavy casualties in the past few months, and the surviving troops were exhausted. As the war settled down to a semi-stagnant state, the partisan units continued to sting the Germans, albeit to a lesser degree than in the previous months.

The Russian offensives had pushed Heeresgruppe Nord and Süd back hundreds of kilometers, leaving Heeresgruppe Mitte occupying a massive bulge in the center of the Eastern Front. In Moscow, staff officers worked night and day in planning a new offensive that was hoped to crack the Germans once and for all. The planned offensive was code-named “Bagration.”

Operation Bagration would strike Heeresgruppe Mitte with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Belorussian Fronts. According to Soviet sources, there were about 150,000 partisans organized into 150 brigades and 49 detachments behind the German front in Belorussia. Bagration was due to begin on June 22, but by the time the offensive opened the partisans were already in action.

On the night of June 19, partisan forces in Belorussia set off more than 9,500 demolitions on German rail lines, and the main lines from Mogilev to Vitebsk and from Minsk



After setting fire to a freight train laden with supplies for the German army, partisans melted away into the neighboring town.

to Orsha were knocked out of action for several critical days. When the Soviet offensive began on the 22nd, the movement of desperately needed supplies and reinforcements was impossible, leaving units on the front line in a hopeless position.

As the Red Army rolled forward, partisans prepared river and stream crossing points that helped Russian tank and infantry units continue to drive west. Partisan units also assisted the Army by seizing and holding bridgeheads ahead of the advance and by cutting off German lines of retreat.

When Bagration was finally over in late August, the Germans had been pushed back almost 600 kilometers in several areas. Most of the Soviet Union had been liberated and Central Europe cowed at the approach of the Red juggernaut. Many of the partisan groups in the Soviet Union were subsequently disbanded, ending the Soviet partisan phase of the war in Russia. Some disbanded units were incorporated into the Army, but other units were sent into German occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia to continue the struggle.

The transplanted partisans had a twofold mission: They were to continue to disrupt German supplies and communications, but they were also ordered to contact communist partisans in the still occupied territories. The Soviet partisans helped form the nuclei of organizations that would eventually bring all of Eastern Europe into the Soviet camp once the war was over. When the Germans were finally defeated, these well-armed, battle-hardened groups represented a popular front that stamped out any democratic movements that dared to stand up against them.

Western historians have debated the effectiveness of the Soviet partisan movement for decades. One perspective describes the movement as an intricate part of the Russian victory, while the other says that the partisans were little more than an annoyance to the Germans. A 1956 U.S. Army handbook on the subject states, "The Soviet partisan movement had a certain measure of success, perhaps as much as a resistance movement can have when opposed by a first class military power." Early post-war

German histories and memoirs also tended to downplay the role of partisan units during the war.

It is clear, however, that Soviet partisans played an important part in several key battles during 1943 and 1944. Their positive effect on the morale of Soviet citizens was also important, as was their negative effect on the morale of the German soldier. It should also be remembered that just by their existence, the partisans forced the Germans to divert much needed units to secure their own rear areas at times when every man was needed at the front.

The debate continues, but in the former Soviet Union men in their twilight years still bring out their war decorations to show their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The young ones, especially in the rural areas, look with awe at the now bent old men when they point to a certain decoration and announce with pride, "I was a partisan."

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THE THUNDER OF OPERATION GALLOP

BY PAT MCTAGGART

WITH VICTORY AT STALINGRAD CLOSE AT HAND, THE SOVIETS
LAUNCHED AN EFFORT TO LIBERATE THE LOWER DON BASIN.

As Adolf Hitler's vaunted Sixth Army lay in its death throes in the ruins of Stalingrad, German forces to the west of the city faced their own kind of hell. The inner ring of the Russians' iron grip at Stalingrad was tasked with the total destruction of German and other Axis troops within the city, but Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin wanted more. In conjunction with the Soviet High Command (STAVKA), Stalin set forth an ambitious plan designed to liberate the Don Basin from Kursk in the north to the Sea of Azov in the south, bringing the vital agricultural and mineral-rich area once more under Russian control.

Germany's allied armies were a shambles. The Hungarian Second Army and the Italian Eighth Army, positioned along the upper Don River, were shattered by General Filipp Ivanovich Golikov's Voronezh Front, causing a yawning gap south of the German Second Army, which was assigned to defend the Voronezh area.

Farther south, General Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin's South West Front, despite heavy opposition, moved toward Voroshilovgrad and Starobelsk. In the Caucasus and along the Donets River, the German troops of Heeresgruppe A (Army Group A) were in a race to the death to escape being trapped by advancing armies of the Trans-Caucasus and the Stalingrad Fronts.

In mid-January, Stalin and STAVKA saw a very distinct possibility of forcing the entire southern flank of the German Army in the east to collapse. With a victory at Stalingrad all but assured, Soviet military planners developed operations aimed at pushing the Germans back to the Dniepr River. The more optimistic planners, including Stalin, hoped for an even bigger push.

A two-pronged attack was finally approved. Operation Skachok (Gallop) would use Vatutin's South West Front to clear the southern Don Basin of the enemy and push him back to the Dniepr. On Vatutin's right flank, Golikov's Voronezh Front was ordered to take Kharkov and then follow the retreating Germans as far west as possible in an operation called Zvezda (Star).

The German forces facing Vatutin had been ground down by weeks of fighting and retreat. Lt. Gen. Fedor Mikhailovich Kharitonov's Sixth Army and Lt. Gen. Vasilii I. Kuznetsov's First Guards Army were fast approaching the Aydar River in the Starobelsk area, while the Third Guards Army under Lt. Gen. Dmitri Danilovich Lelyushenko was threatening to cross the Donets River west of Voroshilovgrad. South of Lelyushenko, Lt. Gen. Ivan Timofeevich Schlemm's Fifth Tank Army was also moving toward the eastern bank of the Donets.

Vatutin also had a combined arms group commanded by Lt. Gen. Markian Mikhailovich Popov, which contained nearly half of the South West Front's armor. In total,



In the 1942 painting *Shell Fire Near Trench Position* by W. Rensellek, German soldiers duck for cover as a Russian shell explodes near their machine gun position. Dressed in white camouflage covers, these Germans were subjected to fierce bombardment during the Soviet winter offensive.

Vatutin had more than 500 tanks and about 325,000 men to fulfill his mission.

Facing the South West Front was a hodgepodge of German units in the process of trying to regain some kind of defensive line and command control. About 160,000 men and 100 tanks from several decimated

ltd, the unit had about 100,000 men and 60 tanks. Another 20,000 troops came from various support and garrison units.

Aware of the enemy disorganization facing him, Vatutin planned his actions accordingly. Born in 1901, Vatutin joined the Red Army in 1920. He saw service during the Russian Civil War and then attended the Frunze Academy, graduating in 1929. Furthering his career, Vatutin attended and graduated from the General Staff Academy and served on the General Staff from 1937-1940. During the Battle for Moscow, he distinguished himself as chief of staff of the Northwestern Front, and in 1942 he was named commander of the South West Front.

Vatutin was considered a gifted strategist, and his opinions were highly valued. He was enthusiastic about the possibility of liberating the Lower Don Basin and destroying the German units defending it, and STAVKA gave him great latitude in forming his plan of attack, which he worked out with his army commanders and staff.

The main blow was to come from the First Guards and Third Guards Armies, which would take Stalino and then Mariupol on the Sea of Azov. This action, supported by Group Popov and the Fifth Tank Army, would trap most of the German units on the Donets River Line south of Kharkov. Divisions of the Southern Front, on Vatutin's left flank, would cooperate by advancing along the Sea of Azov to Rostov and beyond.

In theory, the plan was a good one. Intelligence reports indicated that the Germans were in a state of near panic. Other reports stated that enemy troops were hastily withdrawing from the entire area, which gave Vatutin the view that his operation was a means to crush a beaten and demoralized foe.

The Soviet assessments were wrong to a large degree. Although the Germans were disorganized, commanders

were working together to retain a viable fighting force. German supply lines were much closer since the retreat from the Stalingrad sector, and the ability to form ad hoc units around regimental and divisional cadre was succeeding.

There was also another major factor working for the Germans. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein was in command of the area slated for the Soviet offensive. Architect of the 1940 Ardennes strike against France and the conqueror of Sevastopol in 1942, von Manstein was regarded as having one of the best strategic and tactical minds in the Wehrmacht.

Although the divisions of his Heeresgruppe (Army Group) Don, which became Heeresgruppe Süd (South) in mid-February, were battered, the German commander was already planning a response for what he correctly assumed to be a major Soviet attack in the Don Basin. He knew the Red Army supply lines had greatly lengthened as his own decreased, making it difficult for Soviet armor to receive proper fuel and ammunition replenishment. He also knew that although the Russians had superiority in manpower and equipment their reserves were lacking in numbers for a prolonged attack and breakthrough.

Von Manstein was also lucky in another regard. While the debacle at Stalingrad was still being played out, he had managed to talk Hitler into allowing most of the German forces in the Caucasus to withdraw before being cut off. By the end of January, many of those units, including the First Panzer Army, were regrouping in the Don Basin. The Fourth Panzer Army, commanded by Col. Gen. Hermann Hoth, was also in the process of getting out of the Soviet trap.



ABOVE: During the catastrophic German defeat at Stalingrad, a Wehrmacht soldier peers from cover through a telescopic viewer. The distant Soviet Red Army tightened the ring of steel around the Germans at Stalingrad until they capitulated in February 1943. **OPPOSITE:** Uniformed against the cold, soldiers of the Red Army gather around a campfire during a lull in fighting on the Eastern Front. The Soviet effort to liberate the Don Basin, Operation Gallop, proved overly ambitious.

divisions struggled to pull themselves into some kind of cohesive force to meet the advancing Soviet forces.

The First Panzer Army, commanded by General Eberhard von Mackensen, was just arriving from a grueling retreat from the Caucasus. It had about 40 combat-ready tanks and an estimated 40,000 troops. Army Abteilung Hollidt was a conglomeration of infantry and panzer division remnants. Commanded by General Karl Hol-

As he pressed the issue of the vulnerability of the entire southern sector of the Eastern Front, von Manstein persuaded the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht—German Armed Forces High Command) to release six divisions and two infantry brigades from Western Europe and send them to Heeresgruppe Süd. Among the divisions released were three superbly equipped SS divisions, which had been resting and refitting after the hard-fought 1942 campaign.

On February 1, 1943, Golikov's Voronezh Front began its attack to liberate Kharkov. Excellent progress was made during the first days of the offensive, with General Ivan Danilovich Chernyakowski's 60th Army taking Kursk on February 8. As Kursk fell, Golikov's 40th and 69th Armies, along with the Third Tank Army, advanced on Kharkov, slamming their way through the undermanned defenses of the German Second Army.

Two days before Golikov's offensive began, Vatutin launched Operation Gallop. On January 29, Kuznetsov's First Guards Army crossed the Aydar River and hit General Gustav Schmidt's 19th Panzer Division in the Kabanye-Kromennaya area along the Dnester River. Reeling under a series of hammer blows, the Germans were forced to retreat under a constant barrage of Soviet artillery.

On Kuznetsov's right flank, Kharitonov's Sixth Army, after crossing the Aydar, smashed into elements of Colonel Herbert Michaelis's 298th Infantry Division. With the bulk of the 298th dug in along the Krasnaya River, the forward elements of the division were brushed aside by the advancing Soviets.

Pursuing the retreating Germans, Kharitonov's 15th Rifle Corps made it to the Krasnaya before being stopped by the 298th's makeshift defenses on the western bank. Under heavy fire, the 350th Rifle Division forced crossings north and south of Kupyansk and established bridgeheads on the German side of the river, but further progress was retarded until reinforcements arrived on the scene.

January 30 found the First Guards Army crossing the Krasnaya near the town of Krasny Liman. Pleased with the progress of his assault troops, Vatutin ordered Group Popov to advance and form up at the juncture of the First Guards and Sixth Armies in order to exploit any major breaches in the German line.

For the next few days, Vatutin continued to receive good news from the front. His planning of Gallop seemed to be validated as reports came from the First Guards Army stating that Kremennaya had fallen, the 19th Panzer Division was retreating toward Lisichansk to the south, and that Krasny Liman was also taken.

In the Sixth Army sector, Kharitonov finally crossed the Krasnaya River after the 298th Infantry Division, fearing encirclement by advancing units of the Sixth Army and the Voronezh Front's Third Tank Army, abandoned its positions on the eastern bank. From February 2-5, the 298th fought through Soviet units already in its rear before finally reaching a new defensive



line around Chuguyev on the Northern Donets River.

Sixth Army units also forced General Georg Postel's 320th Infantry Division to retreat from the Krasnaya. While the Sixth Rifle Division attempted to surround Postel's division, the 267th Rifle Division and 106th Rifle Brigade drove on to Izyum, which would fall on February 5.

Sensing victory, Vatutin sent in Group Popov to act as the vanguard of the Soviet attack. A counterattack by some of the First Panzer Army's XL Panzer Corps, commanded by General Sigfrid Henrici, halted Popov's advance in several areas. Other elements of Henrici's corps struck the First Guards Army around Slavyansk, forcing Kuznetsov to halt his attack. Farther south, Lelyushenko's Third Guards Army had now crossed the Donets River near Voroshilovgrad and was engaged in breaking through the defenses of Army Abteilung Hollidt.

The battle around Slavyansk was pivotal for the Germans trying to stop Vatutin's push westward. As long as the town was in von Manstein's hands, Vatutin would have to extend his forces to bypass it, lengthening his supply lines and offering his flanks to German counterattacks.

By February 4, Vatutin found himself facing an increasingly stubborn opponent. Elements of Henrici's XL Panzer Corps were clinging to Slavyansk, fending off the First Guards Army with vicious counterattacks. Kuznetsov threw more units into the battle for the town, but Henrici's men held firm.

About 55 kilometers east of Slavyansk, the First Guards Army's Sixth Guards Rifle Corps, commanded by General Ivan Prokofevich Alferov, was embroiled in a savage fight for control of Lisichansk. General Maximilian Fretter-Pico's XXX Army Corps was charged with the defense of the sectors north and south of the town.

General Karl Casper's 335th Infantry Division, newly arrived from France, was one of the divisions tasked with defending the area south of Lisichansk near the town of Krymskoye. Alferov's 44th Guards Rifle Division gained a small bridgehead on the western bank of the Donets and fought off



ABOVE: Wearing hooded camouflage uniforms, a pair of Red Army soldiers fires an antiquated machine gun at German positions. The winter weather created a no-man's-land of snow and ice between opposing lines. **OPPOSITE:** Visiting the Kertsch Front on May 20, 1942, General Erich von Manstein takes stock in the condition of his troops. Manstein developed a reputation as a superb strategist and was one of the most respected generals in the German Army.

repeated counterattacks by the 335th. Seeing that further assaults were a waste of manpower, Casper ordered his men to cordon off the bridgehead, hoping that reinforcements would be sent to break the Soviet line.

At Lisichansk, Alferov's 78th Rifle Division tried an end run. The 78th crossed the Northern Donets at several points, but once again German forces moved in to seal them off. For the moment, it was a stalemate.

Frustrated, Vatutin threw the 41st Guards Rifle Division into the Lisichansk battle. Defended by Schmidt's 19th Panzer, the Soviets had to clear the town street by bloody street. Aided by elements of the 78th Guards and 44th Guards Rifle Divisions, the Russians finally forced Schmidt's men out of the town to positions in the southwest. The Sixth Guards Rifle Corps followed fast on their heels, but Schmidt was able to work his units like a boxer, bobbing, weaving, and shifting constantly to frustrate any further breakthrough.

On February 6, Hitler called von Manstein to his headquarters at Zaporozhye. The German leader was surprisingly docile, almost apologetic, as he opened the conversation by taking full responsibility for the Stalingrad disaster. Von Manstein was taken aback by the statement because Hitler never blamed himself for any of the misfortunes suffered by the German Army.

With the surprising admission out of the way, the two men turned to the situation at hand. Von Manstein was blunt as he began explaining the position of his Army Group. He told Hitler that under no circumstances could the area between the Don and the Donets be held with the existing forces available.

"The only question is whether, in trying to hang on to the whole basin, we want to not only lose the area but also Heeresgruppe Don," he said. "We will also eventually lose Heeresgruppe A. The alternative is to abandon part of the Basin at the right moment to avert the catastrophe threatening to overtake us."

According to von Manstein, Hitler remained "utterly composed" during the ensuing conversation. Continuing, he told Hitler that trying to hold the entire Basin would allow the Soviets to send strong enough forces to slice through the thinly held German line and envelop the entire southern wing of the Eastern Front. Therefore, he proposed using the First Panzer Army and the Fourth Panzer Army, which were facing General Andrei Ivanovich Yeremenko's Southern Front, to form a strike force to intercept the forces that Vatutin undoubtedly already had in mind for his continued advance.

Moving the Fourth Panzer Army back from the Lower Don would mean giving up the area between the Lower Don and the Mius River to the armies of Yeremenko's Southern Front, but it would also shorten the German line. To protect the southern flank, Army Abteilung Hollidt would also have to withdraw to the Mius. It was a risky plan, but the alternative meant almost certain disaster.

When von Manstein finished, it was Hitler's turn. The Führer could find no flaws in the plan, but his aversion to giving up ground to the enemy was still paramount. He argued that every foot of land cost the Russians men and materials—much more than it cost the Germans. There were also political considerations, such as the effect such a withdrawal would have on Turkey, which was watching developments in Southern Russia very carefully.

Hitler promised reinforcements, cajoled, and used his famous charm and eloquence to convince von Manstein to remain on the Don, but von Manstein would not budge. The impasse went on most of the afternoon, but then Hitler suddenly gave in. Finally having the Führer's blessing, von Manstein hurriedly flew back to his Stalino headquarters to begin issuing orders for the retreat.

Unless an early thaw suddenly hit the area, armored and mechanized units scheduled to pull back would have little problem reaching the Mius ahead of the Soviets. The infantry units of the Fourth Panzer Army and Army Abteilung Hollidt were a different matter. Vulnerable to Russian armored and mechanized forces, the retreating infantry would have to leave a rear guard to conduct a fighting withdrawal while main elements of the division remained on guard against Soviet ambushes and armored raids.

The Soviets were by no means idle as the Germans prepared to withdraw to the shorter Mius Line. The South Front's 44th

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Spread across the wintry landscape of the Soviet Union, German armored vehicles advance eastward toward the major cities of Russia. The German timetable was upset by tenacious Soviet defenses and then compounded by horrific winter weather.

Army took the city of Azov-on-the-Don. Around Slavyansk, where fighting was still raging, Red Army units also took the town of Kramatorsk, some 15 kilometers south of the city.

The following day, February 8, Kharitonov's Sixth Army liberated Andreyevka on the eastern bank of the Northern Donets, about 50 miles south-east of Kharkov. The Soviet commander then turned his forces northeast to strike at Zmiyev, which was on the river's western bank. If Kharitonov could take the town and hold it, the way would be open for an attack on Kharkov from the south.

Kharitonov's spearhead ran headlong into the 2nd Regiment of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH) Panzergrenadier Division commanded by SS Standartenführer (Colonel) Theodore Wisch. Wisch's 1st Battalion, under SS Sturmbannführer (Major) Hugo Kraas, gave the advancing Russians a bloody nose at a small village northeast of Zmiyev. Supported by assault guns, Kraas's men counterattacked, driving the Soviets back.

Late morning found the Russians launching wave after wave of infantry against the village, but the SS held firm. The Soviets then proceeded to attack up and down the line of Wisch's regiment. Supported by assault guns, some panzer companies, engineers, and a flak unit, Wisch successfully held his positions while causing heavy casualties to the Soviet 111th Rifle Division.

Meanwhile, the battle for Slavyansk continued unabated. General Hans Freiherr von Funck's 7th Panzer Division was charged with holding the town. The division was down to only 35 serviceable tanks as it fought to defend Slavyansk against units of General Nikolai Aleksandrovich Gagen's 4th Guards Rifle Corps.

Born in 1895, Gagen was a tough no-nonsense commander who had fought in the brutal battles in the winter of 1941-1942 along the Volkhov River. He was determined to drive the Germans out of the town at whatever the cost. Gagen's 195th Rifle Division had been roughly handled by the 7th Panzer as it tried to fight its way into the eastern part of the town. The Soviet general threw in the 57th Guards Rifle Division in an attempt to take the town from the north and west, but the Germans continued to hold, counter-attacking when the situation required it.

Overhead, Red Air Force bombers and ground attack aircraft roamed the skies over the embattled town. German flak batteries tried to drive them away, but the Soviet pilots pressed on, dropping their deadly cargo on von Funck's position. Red Army artillery also kept up a deadly fire, but the German panzergrenadiers and the engineers of the division were still able to hold the Russians at bay.

Holding Slavyansk helped give other units of the First Panzer Army a chance in their move westward. More of Henrici's XL Panzer Corps was already arriving in the area to

bolster the 7th Panzer. Although General Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division had little more than a dozen tanks, it was a welcome sight to the men of von Funck's command. Colonel Gerhard Grassman's 333rd Infantry Division was in similar shape, having been savaged in earlier actions.

Both sides realized the value of the area between Slavyansk and Kramatorsk, where the German defenses ran along the Krivoy Torets River. If the Soviets could force the Germans from their tenuous positions, Vatutin could use Group Popov's forces to make a deep thrust to the southwest, which would basically cut off the First and Fourth Panzer Armies from the rest of von Manstein's Heeresgruppe. Accordingly, Vatutin pushed more artillery units into the area to give his troops an added punch.

Henrici's XL Panzer Corps, weak as it was, defended the area with great skill. Coordinated attacks by the 4th Guards Tank Corps, 3rd Tank Corps, and the 4th Guards Rifle Corps were repulsed again and again. Balck's 11th Panzer brazenly counterattacked Soviet armor with its few remaining tanks, leaving several T-34s blazing furiously on the battlefield, while the 7th Panzer fended off combined armored-infantry attacks, leaving hundreds of Red Army soldiers dead in the snow.

Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich-Carl von Steinkeller, commanding the 7th Panzer's 7th Panzergrenadier Regiment, was in the thick of the fighting. Keeping on the move, von Steinkeller went from company to company urging his men to hold firm. An artillery observer followed him, ready to call in fire as the situation demanded. He would later receive the Knight's Cross, in part for his actions during the battle.

Popov's 4th Guards Tank Corps, commanded by Pavel Pavlovich Poluboyarov, succeeded in crossing the Krivoy Torets, threatening the rear of the 7th Panzer Division. Henrici immediately ordered Balck's 11th Panzer Division, supported by a regiment from the 333rd Infantry Division, to counterattack. The Germans were met with the blazing guns of Poluboyarov's tanks in front and from dug-in antitank weapons firing from the eastern bank of the Krivoy Torets.

Despite the Soviet fire, Balck and his infantry support were able to push the 4th Guards back along the river valley. Russian infantry accompanying Poluboyarov's tanks panicked and fled, forcing the armor to fend for itself. German sources indicate that 45 Russian tanks were destroyed during the fighting—a significant loss that could only partially be made good by the reinforcements that were trickling in after a grueling journey over extended supply roads.

Vatutin, fed up with the inability of his forces to take Slavyansk and the positions along the Krivoy Torets, reshuffled his units for an all-out assault. Kuznetsov's First Guards Army was ordered to coordinate with Popov for the attack, while Red Air

Force units were given orders to support the operation at all costs.

The westward movement of German units, as per von Manstein's plan, had given Vatutin, Golikov, and STAVKA a false sense of optimism. Hitler never conceded territory—every Russian commander knew that. He had shown it by letting his army freeze at the gates of Moscow and the stubborn refusal to retreat from Stalingrad only reinforced that view.

To the Russian mind the retreat of Heeresgruppe Don from the eastern Don Basin could only be viewed as a somewhat panicked rout. The stubborn resistance around Slavyansk was seen as a desperate attempt to save the fleeing German divisions from being overwhelmed by troops of the South West Front and the South Front, and it was assumed that once the Krivoy Torets line was taken the enemy would collapse.

To crack the German defenses Vatutin ordered the First Guards Army to shift south toward the Krasnoarmeiskoya sector, about 60 kilometers southwest of Slavyansk, to threaten the enemy rear. While that move was taking place, the 35th Guards Rifle Division of Gagen's 4th Guards Rifle Corps forced units of the 333rd Infantry Division out of Lozovaya, a key rail center and supply dump located about 120 kilometers west of Slavyansk. Although the 35th Guards did not press their attack further, taking the town created a dangerous new bulge in the already extended and increasingly confusing lines of battle.

Part of Vatutin's plan was to use Popov's 4th Guards Tank and 3rd Tank Corps to smash their way into Slavyansk, paving the way for the 18th and 10th Tank Corps to strike southwest toward Artemovsk. With Slavyansk secured, the 4th Guards Tank and 3rd Tank Corps were to advance to link up with the First Guards Army at Krasnoarmeiskoye. Together, the two tank corps and units of the First Guards Army would then move southeast to Stalino to trap German units retreating from the eastern Don Basin.

As Vatutin prepared his operation, he received new orders from STAVKA.



ABOVE: General Nikolai Vatutin commanded the Soviet Red Army's South West Front during the fighting in the winter of 1942, which included Operation Gallop. TOP LEFT: General Sigfrid Henrici commanded the German XL Panzer Corps during Operation Gallop. TOP RIGHT: General Eberhard von Mackensen commanded the German 1st Panzer Army during the hard fighting on the Eastern Front in 1942.

Golikov's forces were making good progress toward Kharkov and, lulled by the belief that the Germans were indeed in the midst of a massive disorganized withdrawal to the Dniepr, Moscow saw a new chance to bag several enemy divisions in an even bigger pocket than Vatutin had planned.

Vatutin was therefore given the task of setting up blocking forces to prevent an enemy withdrawal to Zaporozhye and Dnepropetrovsk. At the same time, he was ordered to advance southwest to cut off German and Axis forces in the Crimea. The STAVKA plan was overly ambitious by a wide margin, considering that the South West Front had already been in combat for more than two weeks and had received little in the way of supplies or reinforcements.

With Kharitonov's Sixth Guards Army already supporting Golikov's drive on Kharkov, it would again fall to Kuznetsov and Popov, along with Lelyushenko's Third Guards Army, to accomplish this new mission. The First Guards Army would have the dual tasks of taking Slavyansk with Alferov's Sixth Guards Rifle Corps while other units continued on a westward drive toward Zaporozhye. While this was occurring, Group Popov would make a lightning strike to Krasnoarmeiskoye, taking the town's rail center and threatening the German rear.

Both Kuznetsov and Popov had voiced doubts about Vatutin's earlier proposal. Their units had been manhandled by the Germans, and losses in men and equipment had still not been made good. The two Soviet generals had even graver doubts about the new plan. Supplying their forces as they moved south and west would be a nightmare with the existing supply line, which was already stretched to the limit.

Popov, in making his dash to the south, would have a total of about 180 tanks spread between his four tank corps. He had enough fuel for one refueling and ammunition for two resupplies. The infantry units in his command were in even worse shape. Despite STAVKA's assertions that the Germans were on the run, the field commanders had a more cautious view of the situation.

Vatutin brushed aside his commanders' doubts. These were orders from Moscow and had to be obeyed. The consequences of disobedience were well known, and no Soviet general in his right mind would think about going against the Kremlin at this stage of the war.

Poluboyarov's 4th Guards Tank Corps was chosen to spearhead the new attack. In the early hours of February 11, the Soviet armor began its 85 kilometer charge to Krasnoarmeiskoye. Led by the 14th Guards Tank Brigade, Polubarov's forces cut through the German defenses and moved quickly down the one good road in the area. Following fast on the heels of the 14th were the 3rd Guards Mechanized Brigade, the 7th Ski Brigade, the 9th Guards Tank Brigade, and other corps units.

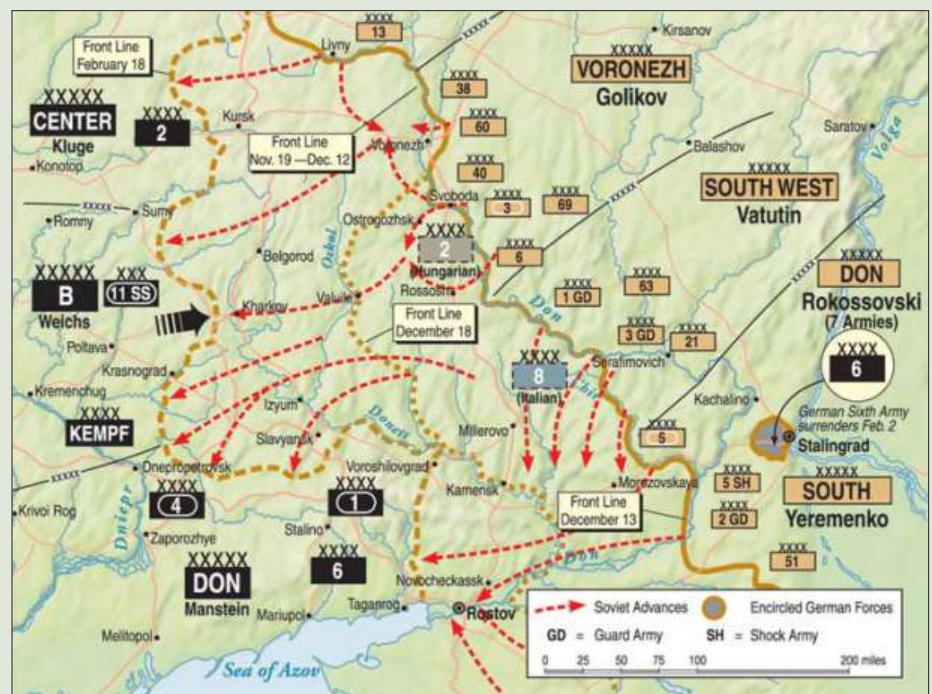
The deep thrust caught the Germans off guard, and by mid-morning the 14th Guards Tank Brigade had taken Krasnoarmeiskoye. With the town secured, the victorious Soviet troops helped themselves to the supplies left in a supply dump by the retreating enemy. The loot, especially the fuel and rations, was a welcome sight to the exhausted Russians.

Another important benefit, not readily apparent to the troops at the scene, was the severing of a vital German supply and communications line. With the capture of Krasnoarmeiskoye, the important Dnepropetrovsk-Mariupol rail line was rendered useless, leaving units of the First Panzer Army and Army Abteilung Hollidt in dire straits.

Group Popov's dramatic march to Krasnoarmeiskoye threw German plans for defending the western Don Basin into disorder. The defense of Slavyansk was now in jeopardy due to the Soviet units to the south and west of the position. Von Mackensen was also in the midst of planning an attack to recapture Kramatorsk, but that too had to be put on hold in light of Popov's success.

Realizing the precarious position of the German troops holding the river lines to the east of Krasnoarmeiskoye, von Mackensen called upon the 5th SS Panzergrenadier Division Wiking. Commanded by SS Gruppenführer (Major General) Felix Steiner, the Wiking was a multinational division made up of Germans, Norwegians, Danes, Swiss, Finns,

Encouraged by their victory at Stalingrad, the Soviets attempted to free the Lower Don Basin. The Germans, many on retreat from the Caucasus, put up a stiff fight and were able to retake all of the territory they had lost early in the battle. OPPOSITE: Battling the intense cold and winter weather as well as the invading Germans, a Soviet patrol and its armored half-track forge their way through a snowy field on the Russian steppe during the winter of 1942.



Walloons, and Estonians. It had just arrived in the Don Basin after an arduous retreat from the Caucasus, and its troops were exhausted.

As elements of the division were just passing through Stalino, Steiner received the following message: "PanzerArmy H.Q. to Division Wiking Urgent! Powerful enemy forces, Popov Tank Group, across the Donets near Izyum advancing southward toward Krasnoarmeiskoye. Wiking Division to immediately turn to the west. Attack toward Krasnoarmeiskoye. Contain the Popov Tank Group. (signed) von Mackensen"

Steiner immediately ordered his division to halt. His original orders were to head north from Stalino to the Konstantinovka area, and the advance units of his Germania Regiment were already headed in that direction. With his chief of staff, Steiner hastily issued new orders. Artillery was regrouped, and the Nordland Regiment was ordered to take the lead in the new westward advance while Germania turned its units around. The division's Westland Regiment was also readied to join in the mad race to stop the Soviets.

With Nordland's reconnaissance platoon leading the way, the regiment hastened toward Krasnoarmeiskoye. By the end of the day, the advance guard under SS Obersturmbannführer (Lieutenant Colonel) Wolfgang Joerchel had overpowered weak Russian forward positions and taken Hill 180, which overlooked the entire Krasnoarmeiskoye sector. Joerchel quickly sent for other battalions of the regiment, which deployed south and west of the town to contain any further Soviet expansion in those directions.

Much of Group Popov was spread out along the road from Kramatorsk to Krasnoarmeiskoye in defensive positions. Von Mackensen realized that Wiking did not have the capability to contain and destroy the Red Army units along the entire length of the road, so he issued new orders to other divisions of his command.

The occupation of Slavyansk was still of utmost importance. Shuffling his forces, von Mackensen ordered two regiments of the 333rd Infantry Division to make a forced march toward Krasnoarmeiskoye. As the weary infantry slogged toward its new goal, the 7th Panzer and 11th Panzer, which were fighting in the areas around Slavyansk and east of the Krivoy Torets River, were ordered to turn their units westward. The 3rd Panzer Division was ordered to extend its line to take over the defensive positions of the two departing divisions. Von Mackensen planned to use the two divisions to strike at Group Popov's extended supply line while Wiking and the two regiments of the 333rd kept up the pressure at Krasnoarmeiskoye.

The movements of the German divisions to their assembly areas were surprisingly fast, and the attack on the supply line began in the early hours of February 12. Soviet defense positions had been set up in each village along the supply road from Kramatorsk, and several strong antitank companies had been brought forward to reinforce the village bastions.

At Krasnoarmeiskoye Steiner planned to use the Germania to flank the town from the west. Supported by the two regiments of the 333rd, Germania was ordered to take the village of Grischino, northwest of the town. While the other Wiking regiments assaulted Krasnoarmeiskoye from the south, elements of von Funck's 7th Panzer would attack

from the east and secure the town's northern flank.

Polubayarov, knowing his precarious position, had kept the units of his 4th Guards Tank Corps on high alert. Each subordinate commander was told to be ready for a German counterattack, and orders were given down to company level to fortify lines of approach that could be used by the enemy. Each soldier was to make the Germans pay for every meter of



land, every house, and every hill that the Red Army had recently liberated on its valiant march to Krasnoarmeiskoye.

SS Standartenführer (Colonel) Jürgen Wagner commanded the Germania Regiment. His men stormed forward into a withering fire from the Soviet positions as they began the assault. Rifle and machine gun bullets slapped around them like angry bees, while tank and antitank shells tore into their ranks. Grenadiers fell, their blood turning the churned up snow a bright crimson, but Wagner continued to urge his men to attack.

The artillery commander of the Wiking, SS Oberführer (Senior Colonel) Herbert-Otto Gille, deftly moved his artillery bat-

talions closer to support the attacks on Krasnoarmeiskoye and Grischino. Supported by flak units, Gille's artillery smashed one Soviet position after another, giving the Germans a chance to rush forward.

Wagner swung his regiment around Grischino and finally broke into the northern edge of the town. At the South West Front headquarters a frantic radio message, which must have been garbled in transmission, was received from the Russian commander defending Grischino. "Have been attacked by 5 SS Panzer Divisions, can only hold out with difficulty. Assistance urgently required. Long live Stalin!"

Once inside the town, Wagner's men found themselves bogged down in house-to-house fighting. It was the same for the other Wiking regiments at Krasnoarmeiskoye. In the close fighting, Gille's artillery was of little use. The lines were too close, and the Soviets used every house as a strongpoint. For the time being the battle for both towns was a stalemate.

North of Krasnoarmeiskoye elements of the 7th and 11th Panzer Divisions drove westward in a forced march. The Germans ran headlong into the 10th Tank Corps and the 41st Guards Rifle Division. Heavy defensive fire from the Russians forced the panzers to slow and finally stop their attack. Seeing that the Soviets could not be broken, the divisions turned toward Kramatorsk to prepare for a new attack on that town.

At Grischino and Krasnoarmeiskoye the battle continued unabated. Wiking had now been joined by the two regiments of the 333rd, and Gille's artillery was hammering the Russian rear areas. In addition, the Soviets were now running short of supplies.

Although Henrici's XL Panzer Corps had its various units involved in several actions stretching from Kramatorsk to Krasnoarmeiskoye, he still had the opportunity to disrupt the supply line to the 4th Guards Tank Corps. Armored reconnaissance companies fought running battles with Soviet supply columns trying to make their way south, and the roads were soon littered with flaming trucks. The hit-and-run tactics

of the Germans struck as the Russians were spread out in single file and usually ended with the destruction of most of the supplies.

Poluboyarov, growing desperate, ordered the 9th Independent Guards Tank Brigade to try and breach the closing ring around Krasnoarmeiskoye. The 9th hit the Westland Regiment north of Krasnoarmeiskoye near the village of Rovny. More than a dozen tanks with mounted infantry pierced the German line and made a push toward the center of the village.

The regimental commander, SS Sturmbannführer Erwin Reichel, had just taken over after SS Sturmbannführer Harry Polewacz was killed in combat. Reichel ordered a battery of 88mm guns supported by Panzergrenadiers into the center of Rovny as the Soviets approached. When the Russians reached the interior of the village, the 88s destroyed almost all of the tanks. The stunned Russian survivors fled, leaving 12 blazing hulks and dozens of dead behind.

Vatutin was not about to give up on Group Popov. Gathering all available reserves, the Soviet general sent them to reinforce the spearhead at Krasnoarmeiskoye. When word was received that Russian reinforcements were headed south, new orders were sent to the scattered German forces of the First Panzer Army. The Wiking and the 11th Panzer Division were told to halt their attacks on February 14 and attempt to pin down the Russian forces at Krasnoarmeiskoye and Kramatorsk. Meanwhile, the battle to hold the Slavyansk area would continue. Von Mackensen also ordered Henrici to use whatever resources necessary to keep pressure on the supply columns following the reinforcements heading toward Poluboyarov's 4th Guards Tank Corps.

Henrici angrily replied to the order, "What am I supposed to use? My men are stretched to the limit already."

"Just do it," von Mackensen replied. "Throw everything in. I don't care how you do it—just get it done!"

While things were strained in the First Panzer Army, the situation around Kharkov was at a critical stage. By February 10, Golikov's 40th and 69th Armies were battling on the outskirts of the city, with the recently arrived II SS Panzer Corps putting up fierce resistance. Bitter fighting raged for the next five days, and Hitler personally intervened, ordering the corps commander, SS Obergruppenführer (Lieutenant General) Paul Hausser, to hold the city at all costs.

Infuriated at what amounted to a death sentence for his men, Hausser disregarded the order and pulled his SS divisions out of Kharkov, forcing other defending German units to disengage as well. On February 16, Golikov reported to Moscow that Kharkov was once again in Soviet hands.

Logistically, both sides were facing a quartermaster's nightmare and both the German and Soviet commanders were in dire straits. With Kharkov gone and the Russians occupying Grischino and Krasnoarmeiskoye, the only supply line open to the First Panzer Army and Army Abteilung Hollidt was the railway that ran through Zaporozhye. The task of supplying German units by this route was hampered by the fact that a main bridge spanning the Dniepr River, destroyed during the 1941 Soviet retreat, had not yet reopened. Supplies had to be unloaded from trains and reloaded to trucks and wagons before making their way farther eastward.

Group Popov was in a similar situation. Reinforcements were trickling in to the 4th Guards Tank Corps but supplies were a different matter. Von Mackensen's orders to Henrici were being carried out by ad hoc units and units taken away from their parent regiments. Although the Soviet armored columns came under some fire as they strove to reach Krasnoarmeiskoye, the supply formations continued to bear the brunt of the German attacks.

Some good news came to Vatutin on February 16 when the rest of the 7th Panzer Division, finally ordered to give up its defense of Slavyansk, pulled out and headed toward

Krasnoarmeiskoye. Units of the First Guards Army finally were able to occupy the entire town, but the victorious Soviets were in no condition to pursue the 7th. The 3rd Panzer Division quickly lengthened its lines to cover the 7th as it raced southwest to join elements of the division already engaging Gagen's 4th Tank Corps.

On February 17, Hitler flew to meet von Manstein at Zaporozhye. Not one to mince words, von Manstein laid out the situation as follows: "Army Abteilung Hollidt had just occupied the Mius River Line, followed closely by the South Front. For the time being, the line could be effectively defended."

The First Panzer Army had halted the Soviets at Grischino and Krasnoarmeiskoye, but the issue there had still not been decided. Von Mackensen's panzer army was also still involved in heavy fighting at Kramatorsk, Lisichansk, and the Slavyansk area, with the issue in all three sectors still in doubt. The forces retreating from Kharkov, now gathered under Army Abteilung Kempf, were withdrawing southwest toward Poltava and the Mozh River.

At first, Hitler refused to believe the seriousness of the situation. Already furious at the loss of Stalingrad, and then Kharkov, he could not believe that the Soviets still had the men and equipment to carry out another operation that could threaten the entire southern wing of his eastern armies. Von Manstein let him rant for a while before submitting a plan to save his threatened Heeresgruppe.

Von Manstein played his hand masterfully, laying out his formula to retake Kharkov. At the mention of recapturing the city, Hitler immediately calmed down and began to listen intently.

Kharkov could only be taken if the southern flank of the Heeresgruppe was secure, so von Manstein proposed consolidating Hausser's SS Panzer Corps into one striking force, taking it away from the Kharkov sector and sending it southeast toward Pavlograd. This action would prevent any further Russian advance on Dnepropetrovsk.

THE COMBINATION OF SOVIET AMBITION AND VON MANSTEIN'S BRILLIANT HANDLING OF THE BATTLE CULMINATED IN A BLOODY DEFEAT FOR THE RED ARMY.

At the same time, Col. Gen. Hermann Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army, which had made the bitter retreat from the Caucasus, would concentrate its units west of Zaporozhye. Together, the two forces would strike the elements of the First Guards Army and the Sixth Army that were advancing toward the vital Dniepr crossings while the First Panzer Army would once again take on Group Popov.

Throughout his briefing, von Manstein continuously played on the premise that the one condition necessary to retake Kharkov was the survival of the First Panzer Army and Army Abteilung Hollidt. When the Soviet threat in the southern Don Basin was eliminated, the Kharkov operation could begin.

Although Hitler was swayed by von Manstein's argument, he was not totally convinced of the plan. The following day, February 18, he again met with von Manstein to discuss the operation. Von Manstein was essentially calling for freedom to maneuver without micromanagement from Hitler or Berlin.

In another heated exchange, Hitler once again voiced his opinion that, although the number of Soviet units facing von Manstein looked impressive on paper, they were really burned-out shells of what were once divisions and brigades. Although he was partially correct, the armies that had taken Stalingrad were already on the move and the threat of

the South Front bursting through Army Abteilung Hollidt's Mius River line would more than overpower the existing German forces in the southern Don Basin.

In the midst of the meeting, von Manstein received reports that units of the First Guards Army had taken Pavlograd and Novomoskovsk, bringing the Soviets to within 20 kilometers of Dnepropetrovsk. Army Abteilung Hollidt also reported several small enemy penetrations along its Mius River defenses. The report also indicated that the Russians were consolidating around Kharkov while sending spearheads farther westward.

A report from Krasnoarmeiskoye indicated that the newly arrived elements of the 7th Panzer Division were trying to break the 4th Guards Tank Corps. Overcoming



Motioning to his troops to follow quickly, a German soldier leads a detachment through a wooded area of Russia. The winter weather took a heavy toll on the unprepared Germans.

fierce resistance from the 14th Guards Tank Brigade, units of the 7th succeeded in taking the town center before being stopped by a Russian counterattack. On the western side of the town the Wiking Division ran headlong into defenses set up by the 12th Guards Tank Brigade and was immediately stalled by heavy defensive fire.

Von Manstein used these developments to hammer home his ideas for destroying the Soviet incursion in the Don Basin. He pointed out that once the muddy season arrived operations at the front would grind to a halt and the Russians could use their rail lines to resupply and reinforce their divisions holding positions deep inside the German lines.

With their men and matériel built up once more, the southern German forces would be in even greater danger of being pinned against the Sea of Azov, and Kharkov would be virtually untouchable. The next day, Hitler suddenly gave von Manstein what amounted to a *carte blanche* for operations in southern Russia and then climbed aboard his transport plane and left.

The German field marshal wasted no time in implementing his plan. Krasnoarmeiskoye was hit hard by the 333rd Infantry Division and the Wiking Division, while the 7th Panzer Division swung north of the town. Poluboyarov's units in the town were now caught in a vise that could only be loosened by attacks from the outside. Popov had already ordered his 3rd Tank Corps to relieve the embattled forces in the town as quickly as possible, but that attempt was soon thwarted.

While the 3rd Tank Corps was racing south, Balck's 11th Panzer Division moved into blocking positions south of Kramatorsk near the village of Gavrilovka. As the 3rd Tank Corps sped toward Krasnoarmeiskoye its flank was shattered by a full-scale attack from Balck's division. Burning Soviet tanks littered the landscape as the Russians desperately tried to regroup to meet the attack, but Balck's men had already achieved their objective of halting the rescue attempt.

By the end of the day, Krasnoarmeiskoye was all but in German hands, Grischino had fallen, and Poluboyarov's 4th Guards Tank Corps was nothing more than a skeleton of a unit with almost all of its tanks destroyed. Leaving the 333rd to mop up Poluboyarov's corps, von Manstein ordered the Wiking to join the 7th Panzer and head north toward the leading ele-



ABOVE: Advancing through a deserted Russian town, German soldiers trek eastward toward the enemy and their crushing defeat at Stalingrad. Although their momentum was halted, the Germans still delivered a bloody repulse to Soviet Operation Gallop. **OPPOSITE:** Assuming the offensive, Red Army soldiers exploit a breakthrough in the Germans lines as they ride aboard Soviet T-34 tanks.

ments of Group Popov's 10th Tank Corps, which had moved into defensive positions around the town of Dobropolye.

February 20 was the final day for the Russian forces inside Krasnoarmeiskoye. Down to only 12 tanks, the Soviets could do little against the pressure brought to bear by the 333rd. In small groups, some of the Red Army soldiers were able to break through gaps in the German line and head north toward the 13th Guards Tank Brigade, which was guarding the area around Barvenkovo.

STAVKA's plan was falling apart, but no one seemed to want to face that reality. Krasnoarmeiskoye was once again in German hands, and the First Panzer Army was hammering away at the Soviet units stretched out on the road south of Kramatorsk. In the north, von Manstein had sent Hausser's SS Panzer Corps to link up with General Otto von Knobelsdorff's XLVIII Panzer Corps, which was part of the Fourth Panzer Army. Together, the two corps struck the Sixth Army near Krasnograd.

In the air, Field Marshal Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen's Luftflotte 4 hit the Soviets with about 1,000 sorties that precluded any attempt by the Russians to form a coherent defense. The increasingly frantic calls from his commanders prompted Popov to ask Vatutin for permission to withdraw his forces. The request was forcefully denied.

Despite the troubling news coming from the Don Basin, Stalin and his general staff still believed they were on the verge of a great victory. New intelligence reports concerning German concentrations were ignored by STAVKA, which was still in a state of euphoria after the victory at Stalingrad. The unrealistic goals set for the Don Basin offensive were part of that euphoria, and it was now costing the Red Army dearly.

By February 21, it was clear to the Germans that the Soviets had been caught flat footed. Fretter Pico's XXX Army Corps moved toward Stalino, while von Knobelsdorff's XLVIII and General Friedrich Kirchner's LVII Panzer Corps advanced on Pavlograd and Lozovaya. Soviet forces around Pavlograd were also under pressure from the II SS Panzer Corps, Corps Raus, and elements of the Fourth Panzer Army. As long as Army Abteilung

Hollidt vigorously defended the Mius River line, Vatutin's forces were going to be in a great deal of trouble.

On February 22, oblivious to the real situation, STAVKA ordered Kharitonov's Sixth Army and the Voronezh Front's Third Tank Army even farther westward. They were met head on by the full power of Hausser's panzers, which smashed Khartinov's center and right wing. Despite the pounding he was taking, Kharitonov ordered his mobile reserves into the battle in a futile attempt to follow the orders from Moscow.

Meanwhile, Group Popov was reeling under the attacks from Henrici's XL Panzer Corps. Desperate for supplies, the Russians no longer had the fuel and ammunition to hold out against the German armored and infantry units. Air supply was tried by the Red Air Force, but von Richthofen's fighters shot the transport aircraft out of the sky at an alarming rate.

Khartinov's Sixth Army was in no better shape. His 25th Tank Corps, which had been ordered to advance in front of the main army, was stretched out almost 100 kilometers to the west when the Germans struck. On February 23, Khartinov was hit on both flanks by the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Division Das Reich and the Sixth Panzer Division. Pounded by the Luftwaffe as well, the 25th Tank Corps disintegrated, its surviving personnel abandoning their equipment and fleeing toward the northeast.

By now, even STAVKA started to notice that something was going very wrong. Reports coming from Popov and Kharitonov painted a picture of panic among their troops, and their commanders begged for something to be done before they were all annihilated.

With his Sixth Army almost in ruins, Vatutin sent a rifle corps from the First Guards Army to support Kharitonov. To the north, Golikov, sensing the impending danger to his left flank, ordered his 69th and Third Tank Armies to swing southward to add to that support, but it was already too late to stop the German momentum.

On February 24, von Manstein sent the II SS Panzer Corps toward Pavlograd. The attack rolled over the 1st Guards Tank Corps and the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps, which had been sent to defend the town. They were Vatutin's last reserves. After a sharp battle, SS forces occupied the town and went on to pursue the fleeing Russians, who had left most of their equipment behind.

Now fully aware of the consequences of the German attacks, Vatutin ordered the Sixth Army to take a defensive posture. The sad truth was that Khartinov had little resources left with which to defend his sector. With Hausser's divisions surging forward, most of the Sixth Army was already in full flight.

During the next two days the units of the First Panzer and Fourth Panzer Armies retook much of the land lost in the early days of February. By February 27, Group Popov had all but been destroyed and the Sixth Army was on the verge of disintegration. The First

Guards Army had also suffered heavily under continued German attacks.

It was now painfully clear to Moscow that Operation Gallop was finished. Orders were sent to the remnants of the Sixth Army and the First Guards Army to withdraw and set up new lines on the Northern Donets River. Any thoughts of renewing the attack in the near future were shattered in the first days of March, when the II SS Panzer Corps essentially



destroyed the Third Tank Army.

The combination of Soviet ambition and von Manstein's brilliant handling of the battle culminated in a bloody defeat for the Red Army. The stage was now set for one of von Manstein's greatest accomplishments—the recapture of Kharkov—which would take place in mid-March.

That achievement has largely overshadowed the desperate February struggle for the Lower Don Basin. However, without the defeat of the Red Army on the Donets-Dniepr battlefield, the German reoccupation of Kharkov would probably never have been possible. □



» The climactic tank battle at Kursk spelled the beginning of the end for the Wehrmacht in Russia.

BY LUDWIG HEINRICH DYCK

SHOWDOWN AT PROKHOROVKA AND OBOIAN



This captured painting by a German combat artist appears like a fiery image from Dante's *Inferno*. German tanks advance past the blazing hulks of Soviet armored vehicles toward their next engagement.

WITH THE GERMAN SIXTH ARMY DESTROYED at Stalingrad, the Soviet juggernaut lunged west and southwest across the River Donets. The Soviets seemed unstoppable, recapturing the major city of Kharkov from the Germans on February 14, 1943. However, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein was only waiting for the Soviets to overextend themselves.

Once the Soviet armor ran dry of fuel and low on ammunition, Manstein unleashed Army Group South's riposte. Fresh panzer formations sliced into the startled Soviet flanks, ripping apart two Soviet Fronts (Army Groups). Manstein's brilliant counteroffensive restored the southern front and culminated in an SS frontal assault and a triumphant recapture of Kharkov.

Meanwhile, to the north of the Donets campaign, the Soviet winter offensive was held at bay before Orel by Field Marshal Günther von Kluge's Army Group Center. Operations everywhere then bogged down to a standstill as the Russian spring thawed the frozen earth and turned it to mud. The thick "*rasputitsa*" clung to steel tank tracks, to truck tires, to the hoofs of tired horses, and to the boots of exhausted soldiers.

The front was left with a gargantuan Soviet salient, 150 miles long and 100 miles wide, bulging around the town of Kursk between the two German army groups. The Kursk salient was consequently the target of the last, great German summer offensive, ending with the legendary tank battles in the environs of Oboian and Prokhorovka.

With the third summer of the German-Soviet war approaching, the Red Army war machine had grown more powerful while that of the Germans proportionally declined. Despite VonManstein's recent victory at Kharkov, only the most fanatical senior German commanders, along with Hitler, believed that the Soviet Union could be decisively defeated. A stalemate, however, was still in the cards, but only if the Germans managed to retain the initiative. To do so, Col. Gen. Kurt Zeitzler, chief of Army general staff, proposed eliminating the Kursk salient.

In what came to be known as Operation Citadel, the Ninth Army of von Kluge's Army Group Center would strike for Kursk from the north while his Second Army defended the western face of the salient. At the same time, von Manstein's Army Group South would attack toward Kursk from the south with Colonel General Herman Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army and General Werner Kempf's Army Detachment. Once the two German army groups met, the Soviet armies in the salient would be encircled and consequently destroyed. The Eastern Front would be straightened out, allowing German troops to be transferred to the West along with thousands of Soviet prisoners to toil in the Reich's factories and on its farms.

Such were the rewards of victory, and to achieve it Zeitzler counted on the new, vaunted Panther tanks and the Ferdinand or “Elephant” tank destroyer.

Hitler presented Zeitzler’s plan to his senior Army commander on May 3-4. Von-Manstein argued that Citadel might have worked in April, when Hitler first signed the operational order, but now its “success was doubtful.” Field Marshal Walter Model, commander of the Ninth Army, cautioned that the plan was painfully obvious and that the Soviets were already preparing deep and strong defensive positions.



VonKluge, who liked to curry favor with Hitler but was known as a fence sitter, supported Citadel but argued against any further delay, so if it failed he could not be blamed. Col. Gen. Heinz Guderian, the inspector general of armored troops, called the idea “pointless,” certain to result in heavy tank casualties. Furthermore, he made it clear that the Panthers and the Elephants were in no way ready for combat.

When Wilhem Keitel, Hitler’s chief of the armed forces high command, later argued for the attack on political reasons, Guderian spat back, “How many people do you think even know where Kursk is?” Hitler admitted the idea made his “stomach turn over,” but eventually not only decided in favor of Citadel but delayed it for two months until the new tanks were ready.

Historian Charles Winchester has aptly noted, “The idea that an offensive involving millions of men fighting across a battlefield half the size of England could be determined by a few hundred new tanks shows touching faith in technology.”

Hitler’s delays played right into Soviet hands. Stalin heeded the advice of Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, deputy commander of the Red Army, and Marshal Alesksandr M. Vasilevsky, chief of the Army general staff, to postpone a Soviet offensive until the Germans bled themselves dry on the Kursk defenses. And those defenses were awe inspiring. Half a million railcars rolled into the Kursk salient, pouring in division after division. Whole towns in the forward areas were evacuated. Three hundred thousand civilians, mostly women and old men, helped dig trenches and build fortifications. The southern shoulder of the salient alone boasted 2,600 miles of trenches and mine densities of 5,000 per mile of front, laid out to channel the panzers into the crossfire of antitank strongholds.

The 48th Panzer Corps Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Friedrich W. von Mellenthin, poignantly summoned up the German predicament: “The Russians were aware of what was coming and had converted the Kursk front into another Verdun. The German Army threw away all its advantages of mobile tactics, and met the Russians on a ground of their own choosing. Instead of seeking to create conditions in which maneuver would be possible ... the German Supreme Command could think of nothing better than to fling our magnificent panzer divisions against Kursk, which had become the strongest fortress in the world.” If this was not adversity enough, the Soviets had twice as many men, two and a half times as many guns and mortars, 900 more planes, and 750 more tanks than the Germans.

Just before the battle, an SS trooper in the coal black darkness outside of a command bunker thought to himself, “The mud might slow us down but it cannot stop us. Nothing will.” Alfred Novotny, a fusilier of the elite Grossdeutschland Panzergrenadier Division, was of the same mind: “We were totally convinced as soldiers that Kursk would turn the war around again, in favor of Germany. We, the Fusiliers and Grenadiers, would do it!” The high morale was due in part to the fact that the soldiers were unaware of what they were facing. The troops were “prepared to endure any losses and carry out every task given to them,” but “the Russians are masters at the art of camouflage. Inevitably their strength was considerably underestimated,” reflected Mellenthin.

Over 2 million men, 35,000 guns, 6,250 tanks and assault guns, and 4,900 aircraft were flung at each other by two merciless totalitarian regimes, each bent on the utter annihilation of its foe. The German attack in the south opened at 3 pm on July 4, 1943, followed 12 hours later by the attack in the north. Forewarned of the exact time of Model’s attack by intelligence operatives, Soviet commanders ordered their artillery to bombard Model’s front lines before his own artillery had a chance to open up. The Germans answered back with air strikes and with a short but intense bombardment.

Tiger tanks, Elephant tank destroyers, and Brummbär self-propelled artillery battalions of the Ninth Army smashed gaps into the Soviet defenses and chewed up counterattacks by the Soviet Central Front. Through the gaps poured the panzer and infantry divisions, only to find another of eight skillfully defended defensive belts.

Not only were the Soviet defenses far thicker than anticipated, but Hitler’s beloved 89 Elephants, all fighting with Army Group Center, did not live up to expectations. Although their powerful, long L/71 88mm guns proved deadly to Soviet armor, the 67-ton Elephants were underpowered and lacked a machine gun for protection against enemy infantry. When attacked by Soviet close-combat infantry anti-tank units, some Elephant crews tried to fend off the Soviets by firing their MG-42 machine guns through the main barrel.

Another nasty surprise was the Central Front’s 12 new SU-152s. The front’s 152mm assault gun unit knocked out seven Elephants and 12 Tigers of Model’s attacking units, earning it the nickname *Zveroboi* (animal hunter). After a week of round-the-clock fighting, Model’s exhausted Ninth Army was nowhere near breaking into the open, having only penetrated nine miles.

Soviet casualties were heavy, but they did not prevent Zhukov from launching an offensive in the Orel sector on Model’s northern flank on July 11. From then on, Model was



ABOVE: In an attempt to beat back a Red Army breakthrough near Belgorod, German artillery fires at the Soviet spearhead. In the foreground, a Waffen SS grenadier keeps watch over Soviet prisoners. **OPPOSITE:** The Mark V Panther medium tank was the German response to the outstanding performance of the Red Army's T-34. The Panther sported sloped hull armor and a 75mm high velocity cannon.

hard pressed just to contain a Soviet breakthrough. Zhukov, who had failed to destroy Army Group Center in two previous winter offensives, remained fixated on its destruction. He should have paid more attention to the southern flank of the salient, where VonManstein's thrust made dangerous gains.

Alfred Novotny has never forgotten the 4th Panzer Army's opening artillery barrage and the foul weather that accompanied it: "The first hours of the Kursk offensive still cause flashbacks 50-odd years later. Sometimes I think I can still hear the incredible loud noise of the German weapons ... flak, artillery, mortars, Stukas, and Nebelwerfers. I cannot forget the endless, terrible rain, rain, and more rain. We were totally drenched, heavily laden down with equipment, knee deep in mud all around us."

The Soviet defenses facing Novotny and his comrades were as formidable as they were in the north, but the defending Soviet armies had more front line to cover and, unlike Model, VonManstein used massed armor formations from the onset. A bombardment that used more shells than the French and Polish campaigns combined opened the way for Hoth's 4th Panzer Army, the most powerful concentration of German armor under a single command during World War II.

The 4th Panzer Army blasted its way through the defenses of the Soviet 1st Tank Army and 6th Guards Army. The latter's Guards distinction and the superior equipment that came along with it were indicative of its elite, veteran status. There were many Guards divisions at Kursk, and most of them had earned their distinction at Stalingrad.

Fighting with the 48th Panzer Corps on 4th Panzer Army's left wing, the 200 Panthers at Kursk turned out to be a disappointment just like the Elephants to the north. Although the Panther eventually turned out to be arguably the best tank design of the war, at Kursk it suffered from mechanical problems and inadequately trained crews. By the second day of the battle, the Panthers, armed with high-velocity 75mm guns, were reduced to 50 in number. After five days, there were only 10 left.

The bulk of the fighting was left to the old workhorses of the German Army, the Panzer Mark IIIs and Mark IVGs with their new anti-tank rifle side skirts, the assault guns, and a relative few of the feared heavy Tigers, with their 88mm guns, to the defeat the Soviet armor. With their help, the battle-hardened veterans of General Otto von Knobelsdorff's 48th Panzer Corps fought their way through swamps and streams and overcame mine-infested belts of trenches. Strongholds of camouflaged antitank rifle infantry, sappers

with explosives, dug in heavy antitank guns, Soviet T-34 medium tanks, and tank destroyers awaited the German armor.

Not only that, but the land sloped upward toward Kursk, giving the Soviets a clear view. Even so, Grossdeutschland managed to reach the outskirts of the villages of Kruglik and Nowosselowka by July 9. On the left wing of the 48th Panzer Corps, however, General Mikhail E. Katukov's 1st Tank Army held up the 3rd Panzer Division in the woods north of Beresowka. To capitalize on this limited success, General Nikolay F. Vatutin, commander of the Voronezh Front, transferred two tank corps and a rifle division from his reserve to Katukov.

With its left flank dangerously exposed, Grossdeutschland abandoned its northward drive and swung to the southwest on July 10, to trap and destroy the enemy between Grossdeutschland and the 3rd Panzer Division. The diary of a Grossdeutschland soldier reads, "Squadron after squadron of Stukas come over to drop their deadly eggs on the Russian armor. Dazzling white flames indicate that another enemy tank has brewed up."

A Major Franz of the Grossdeutschland assault gun battalion sped toward the village of Kruglik when "at 300 meters from the village ... I suddenly saw fiery red arrows coming toward us from the outskirts. There were explosions directly in front of the mass of advancing assault guns ... we were under fire from a Stalin Organ."

General Andrei L. Getman remembered, "Many of our soldiers and commanders fell heroically in the five days of ferocious battle. Nevertheless, the corps continued to resist the enemy. Meeting organized fire resistance he ceased his attacks by nightfall."

That evening, the 3rd Panzer Division had joined the chaotic fighting among the groves and ravines that nearly eliminated the 6th Tank Corps. On July 11, the remnants of the 6th Tank Corps and the mauled 90th Guards Rifle Division pulled back to the west. The 3rd Panzer Division filled Grossdeutschland's forward positions, allowing the latter to prepare for a renewed push to the north. It was not to

be. During the night of the 11th, reinforced Soviet counterattacks flung the 3rd Panzer Division out of its new positions.

While Grossdeutschland dealt with the problems on its left flank, Knobelsdorff ordered the 11th Panzer Division to strike north along the road to Oboian and to the River Ps'ol. Its vanguard stood on the highest point on the way to Oboian. A soldier remembered, "One could see far into the valley of the Ps'ol River, the last natural barrier before Kursk. With field glasses the towers of Oboian could be made out in the fine haze. Oboian was the objective. It seemed within an arm's reach. Barely 12 miles away."

Although bloodily slashed by the 11th Panzer Division, the Soviet defenders refused to give way. Not only that, but Vatutin gathered his forces for a massive counterstroke to "encircle and destroy the main German grouping penetrating to Oboian and Prokhorovka." Victory for either side still hung in the balance, for, on the right wing of the 4th Panzer Army, the 2nd SS Panzer Corps was simultaneously on the verge of a decisive breakthrough.

SS General Paul "Papa" Hausser's cream of the Waffen SS armor reached the River Ps'ol. On his left flank, the 3rd SS Panzer Grenadier Division Totenkopf (Death's Head) crossed the Ps'ol on pontoon bridges on the 10th and immediately engaged the Soviet 52nd Guards Rifle Division and the 11th Motorized Rifle Brigade. To avoid further bridging operations for his heavy tanks, Hausser's two other panzergrenadier divisions advanced south of the river.

The 1st Leibstandarte (Bodyguard) SS Adolf Hitler and the 2nd SS Das Reich (The State) panzergrenadier divisions pushed eastward through Soviet artillery barrages and dug-in tanks of the Soviet 2nd Tank Corps and elements of the 5th Guards Army. Leibstandarte spearheads were already at the outskirts of the Prokhorovka on July 9. The SS formations were aided by initial German air superiority and by Vatutin's massive, chaotic redeployments, which caused Soviet units to pull back in some areas.

By July 11, paratroopers had dug in and stiffened Soviet resistance. A trooper of the



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9th Guards Airborne Division recalled, "The village of Lutovo shuddered from exploding bombs, shells and mines. The soldiers observed the enemy from foxholes. Infantry poured out of the armored transporters. The distorted faces of the Fascists bore witness ... that their warlike ardor was roused by a large dose of schnapps. Submachine gunners opened fire on the run and concealed themselves behind the tanks. A squall of 3rd Battalion fire met the Fascists. The long bursts of [Soviet] heavy machine guns struck the infantry in the flanks."

Meanwhile, General Herman Breith's 3rd Panzer Corps' northward thrust east of the Donets was constantly thwarted by the 7th Guards Army and the 69th Army. Von Manstein urged Kempf to have Breith catch up to the 2nd SS Corps and cover its right flank. On July 11, the Tigers of the 503rd Heavy Panzer Detachment ripped through the Soviet 305th Rifle Division and tore into the 107th Rifle Division to its rear. The 6th Panzer Division lunged forward nearly eight miles, and the 19th Panzer Division also made good progress. Although Breith's armored spearheads were still 15 miles from Prokhorovka, the remaining Soviet defenses were too weak to absorb another German assault. Unless Vatutin immediately rushed in reinforcements, Breith and Hausser would break through to Prokhorovka.

Seven Soviet armies now surrounded the 20-mile deep bulge that the armor formations and the following infantry divisions of 4th Panzer Army and the Kempf Army had bitten into the Kursk salient. To blunt the German advance and at the same time launch his massive counteroffensive, Vatutin rushed in Lt. Gen. Pavel A. Rotmistrov's crack 5th Guards Tank Army. The 5th Guards Tank Army, along with the already committed 5th Guards Army, was transferred from Col. Gen. Ivan S. Konev's Steppe Front. Konev's Front was to lead the planned post-Kursk counteroffensive.

The early commitment of two of the Steppe Front's armies shows how critical the situation had become at Prokhorovka. Stalin even ordered Zhukov to fly to the Prokhorovka area and personally oversee the two Fronts. Reinforced by two tank corps

SS 1st Lt. Rudolf von Ribbentrop, son of the Nazi foreign minister, commanded a company of six Mark IVs, which drove down a slope to aid the hard-pressed panzergrenadiers. Ribbentrop's company knocked out a handful of T-34s at 800 meters. The Mark IV, the most common German tank at Kursk, was not as fast as the T-34 or as heavily armored, but it had a superior gun and fire control. In the end, tactics and training proved decisive.

Soviet infantry, dead or alive, were hurled off the burning tanks. With its infantry seeking cover, the Soviet armor bravely sped on until the tanks of both sides sliced through each other. "There was neither time nor room to disengage from the enemy and reform in battle order or operate in formation. The shells fired at close range pierced not only the side armor but also the frontal armor," witnessed Rotmistrov from his observation post on a hill.

"A T-34 began to burn," reported Ribbentrop. "It was only 50 to 70 meters from us. At the same instant the tank next to me took a direct hit and went up in flames. His neighbor to the right was also hit and soon it was also in flames. The avalanche of tanks rolled
Silhouetted against a battle-scarred landscape, a German Tiger tank is seen in action at Kursk on July 13, 1943.

straight toward us ... from this range every round was a hit."

Ribbentrop knocked out four more Soviet tanks. On the last one, he scored a direct hit at 10 meters. He recalled, "The T-34 exploded, and its turret flew about three meters through the air, almost striking my tank's gun."

Ribbentrop had turned with the waves of Soviet tanks that swept by him. Soon they were under withering fire from German assault guns and two more panzer companies lurking down the slope behind an antitank ditch. Amid the thick smoke and dust, the jumble of Soviet tanks and wrecked vehicles, Ribbentrop's Mark IV remained unnoticed by the Soviet tanks around him. "Machine guns firing, we rolled through a mass of [Soviet] troops from behind," he said.

Ribbentrop pulled his Mark IV into cover behind a destroyed T-34 and joined the slaughter of the Soviets tanks trying desperately to cross a bridge over the antitank ditch. "Burning T-34s ran into and over one another. It was a total inferno of fire and smoke, and impacting shells and explosions," he remembered. A shell hit Ribbentrop's turret, driving the gunner's sight into his eye and inflicting a serious head injury. He was able to reach the safety of the German lines after he and his crew had knocked out 14 Soviet tanks.

Meanwhile, north of Oktiabr'skii, the Tigers of SS Captain Heinrich Kling's 13th Heavy Panzer Company crushed through hedgerows and thickets. Suddenly, a wave of 60 Soviet tanks swept out of a wood less than a mile away. Second Lieutenant Michael Wittmann's Tiger rocked from the recoil as his 88mm gun knocked out the first T-34. The Soviet tanks fired on the go, rapidly closing the distance. Four Tigers were hit and temporarily crippled.

Wittmann's Tiger shuddered from two hits but remained unfazed although his radio operator received a wound in the upper arm. "Three o'clock, three hundred!" cried Wittmann. A T-34 appeared out of some bushes. It swung its 76.2mm gun toward Wittmann's Tiger, but Wittmann's gunner, Balthasar Woll, was faster. The 88mm muzzle flashed and blew the turret off the T-34.

Captain Hans Ulrich Rudel's Stukas appeared above the dueling tanks. Oily black smoke spiraled into the sky. Like birds of prey, the Stukas howled down upon the Soviet tanks. Armed with 37mm cannon, the Stukas blasted at the vulnerable Soviet rear armor. Swarms of Soviet Yak fighters appeared, shooting up the slow Stukas. Then, Messerschmitt Me-109 fighters tore into the Yaks until the chaos and destruction on the ground





Both: National Archives



ABOVE: Soviet soldiers labored to dig 6,000 miles of defensive trenches prior to the commencement of Operation Citadel. More than 300,000 Russian civilians contributed to the effort. **LEFT:** Soviet Marshal Georgi Zhukov, a commander of the Red Army units engaged at Kursk, strides to a meeting with subordinates. To his right is Aleksandr Vasilevsky, chief of the Soviet general staff.

was mirrored in the sky.

Wittmann's platoon of three Tigers pushed on through the storm of steel, through the flames and smoke of burning grass. He had passed Prokhorovka when Kling's voice rang through the radio, "Achtung! Strong force of enemy tanks approaching from ahead! Many tanks!" Soviet tanks of the 181st Tank Brigade closed in from about a mile away, disappearing into a valley and then reappearing over a rise. The stationary Tigers' guns opened and maintained a rapid rate of fire. Numerous Soviet tanks were blown to pieces, but the remaining machines kept coming. They had to close to within 800 meters to be able to penetrate the Tigers' frontal armor.

Leading a group of 15 tanks, Captain P.A. Skripkin's T-34 closed in on Wittmann's platoon. "Forward, follow me!" he shouted. Skripkin fired a round into a Tiger's side, disabling it. Wittmann's Tiger responded by pumping two rounds into Skripkin's tank. Skripkin was wounded, and his crew pulled him out of the burning T-34. The driver jumped back in, and like a flaming ball of fire his T-34 tore down onto SS Staff Sergeant Georg Löttsch's Tiger. Löttsch steered straight toward the oncoming Soviet tank, slammed on the brakes and fired. The 88mm round hit the edge of the turret and ricocheted into the sky. The 30-ton T-34 rammed into Löttsch's Tiger, shaking the ground with its impact. Flames engulfed both tanks. Löttsch kept his nerves and backed out just before the T-34's ammunition exploded.

Despite horrendous losses, the Soviets kept up the pressure. From north of Oktiabr'skii to south of Storozhevo, the battle seesawed back and forth. The Leibstandarte's efforts to advance were thwarted by packs of Soviet tanks and infantry. The 1st Panzer Regiment was forced back to Oktiabr'skii. By 6 pm, the 181st Tank Brigade, assisted by the 170th Tank Brigade, threatened to sever the link between the Leibstandarte and Totenkopf at the village of Vasil'evka. Meanwhile, at Storozhevo, Leibstandarte grenadiers reeled under an avalanche of Soviet tanks and mounted infantry.

A tank destroyer crewman recounted, "Salvo after salvo of Stalin's Organs rained down upon our positions, with artillery and mortar shells in between. T-34 after T-34 rolled over the hill ... three ... five ... ten ... but what was the use of counting?" At one point Soviet tanks penetrated to Komsomolets, threatening Leibstandarte's command post and engaging its artillery regiment at point-blank range.

By midafternoon the sky broke into heavy showers. Rain sizzled on swaths of smoldering tank carcasses, and roads turned into mud pits. Combat in the 29th and 18th Tank Corps sector ground to a halt. Both sides were too drained by the terrible ordeal to go on.

All along Vatutin's front, the 4th Panzer Army advances on July 12th had been arrested

or slowed down, but so had Vatutin's own offensive. The cost had been extremely heavy. The 5th Guards Tank Army lost about 650 tanks, although only 250 or so of them were total write-offs. Gross's battalion alone accounted for 90 Soviet tanks, earning him the Knight's Cross. The 2nd SS Corps lost just over 60 tanks and assault guns completely destroyed. The SS owed part of its success to the one-eyed "Papa" Hausser who "untiringly led all day from the front," inspiring his troops with "his presence, his bravery and his humor, even in the most difficult situations," noted Hoth, whose recommendation earned Hausser the oakleaves to his Knight's Cross.

During the night, troopers dug in and prepared for renewed offensives on the 13th. Soviet and German soldiers alike felt that victory could be achieved if, somehow, the last bits of energy could be called forth. The following day, the weight of the battle in the 2nd SS Corps sector switched from the Leibstandarte to Totenkopf and Das Reich. With its remaining 54 tanks and 20 assault guns, Totenkopf continued to advance north of the Ps'ol, engaging two Guards rifle divisions and the 51st Guards Tank Regiment. Totenkopf reached its objective, the Prokhorovka-Kartasshevka road, but was forced to relinquish its gains due to serious attacks on its left flank and the Leibstandarte's failure to keep abreast south of the river.

Northeast of Oktiabr'skii, the Leibstandarte was flung back by airborne troops and riflemen supported by Soviet tanks, antitank guns, artillery, and mines. Rotmistrov related, "The fire of our Katyushas always instilled terror in the Fascists. Suffering great losses, the enemy was forced to fall back, abandoning the burning tanks and the bodies of his dead soldiers and officers." The Soviets went on the offensive, but just north of Komsomolets State Farm they were given a dose of the German's own nebelwerfer rocket launchers.

South of the Leibstandarte, Das Reich captured Storozhevo and reached the outskirts of Vingoradovka, giving the Soviets cause for concern. It looked like Das Reich might link up with the 3rd Panzer Corps,

which was rapidly gaining ground due to a daring night coup by Major Franz Bäke of the 6th Panzer Division.

A T-34 had led a column of vehicles into the darkness behind Soviet lines. The guards at the trenches must not have looked closely because the T-34s' markings were painted over and replaced with a small cross. It was one of the score or so of T-34s in German service, and Bäke used it to lead his battalions past the Russian sentries. After six miles or so, the T-34 broke down, "no doubt moved by national sentiments," Bäke opined.

On crept Bäke's battalions, past stationary T-34s, their crews sleeping in the grass. A column of Soviet tanks appeared heading in the opposite direction. In the darkness, all tanks looked the same, or did they? He recalled, "They obviously believed [Bäke's tanks] to be their own tanks returning from the front. Twenty-two tanks passed my unit, almost track to track. But then six or seven pulled out of the column, turned, rolled back and pulled in behind us." Bäke turned his Panzer to block the T-34s. Although his own command panzer had only a dummy gun for protection, Bäke ordered the rest of his unit to continue and to secure the objective bridge.

The T-34s ominously drew up in a semicircle while Bäke and his operations officer slipped out of their panzer. They crept up to the T-34s and attached hollow charges. A handful of infantry was hitching a ride on one of the T-34s. One of them noticed Bäke and raised his rifle. Bäke snatched the rifle from the Russian's hand and jumped into a ditch. One after the other, three explosions lit up the night. One of Bäke's tanks knocked out a fourth T-34. German and Soviet machine-gun and tank fire erupted. The startled Soviets withdrew across the nearby Donets Bridge at Rzhavets and blew it up behind them but could not prevent German grenadiers from wading across the river.

The bridge was captured and repaired, leaving the 3rd Panzer Corps free to thrust northward. To stop them, General Kuzma Trufanov, deputy commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army, hurled one rifle divi-

sion, two reinforced Guards tank, Dugades and two mechanized brigades at the 3rd Panzer Corps. On July 13, while the 19th Panzer Division, and behind it the 7th Panzer Division, were trying to move out of the bridgehead, the 6th Panzer Division was busy fending off Trufanov's divisions around Aleksandrovka to the east. That day, the 6th Panzer Division suffered a heavy blow from friendly fire. A German Heinkel He-111 bomber accidentally bombed 6th Panzer Division headquarters, killing 15 and wounding Bäke and his division commander, Maj. Gen. Walther von Hünersdorf, and 47 other officers.

To the west, Grossdeutschland's northward advance on July 13 was cancelled due to renewed Soviet onslaughts against the 3rd Panzer Division. For a while all contact with the 3rd Panzer Division was lost as the Soviets recaptured Beresowka. On Grossdeutschland's right flank, the 11th Panzer Division was also unable to press forward due to intense Soviet counterattacks. Rain and muddy roads also hampered the supply of the troops.

Despite the setbacks, Hoth and Kempf continued to have full confidence in victory. Hitler had other ideas. The Führer summoned his army commanders to his Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia. Hitler told them that the Allies had landed in Sicily on July 10 and that Citadel must be called off immediately to enable the transfer of troops to Italy. Kluge agreed because he was already embroiled in Zhukov's Orel counteroffensive.

VonManstein, who had originally argued against the whole Kursk operation, pressed for the attack to continue, saying, "To break off the battle now would probably mean throwing away victory." VonManstein still had the fresh 24th Panzer Corps with 112 tanks in reserve. He wanted to wear the Soviets down through attrition and thereby forestall major Soviet offensives elsewhere.

"We were now in the position of a man who has seized the wolf by the ears and dare not let him go," was VonMellenthin's impression. Hitler, however, had made up his mind. Four days later he ordered the withdrawal of the 2nd SS Panzer Corps followed by the transfer of Grossdeutschland to Army Group Center. Until then, VonManstein did his best to destroy as many of the enemy as he could.

On July 14 and 15, Grossdeutschland and the 3rd Panzer Division beat back two tank corps, a Guards corps, and Soviet rifle divisions to recapture the territory lost on the 12th. Throngs of Soviet infantry were sent fleeing to the west to be caught in a barrage of murderous German artillery fire. For the Soviets, however, the most dangerous situation was a linkup between the 2nd SS Panzer Corps and the 3rd Panzer Corps. If this happened, the Soviet salient between the two German corps would be closed and the five Soviet divisions therein trapped.

Despite their recent wounds, both Bäke and Hünersdorf were back leading the 6th Panzer Division on another attack on Alexandrovka. Bäke himself knocked out two Soviet tanks and an antitank gun while his battle group destroyed another 29 tanks and 25 antitank guns. Hünersdorf's luck, however, ran out. A sniper shot him in the head on July 14, killing him.

That same day in the Das Reich sector, grenadiers fought house to house in the village of Belenichino, destroying 12 Soviet tanks in close combat. SS Lance Corporal Simon Grascher remained glued to the ground in a storm of small caliber, grenade, and antitank fire. The flanking fire of two T-34s was decimating his company. Spurning the dangers, Grascher fought his way forward. He overcame two bunkers and a number of machine gun nests to destroy one of the T-34s with his last hollow charge. Grascher knocked out the second T-34 by throwing a grenade in the temporarily opened hatch. Grascher was killed in the fierce battles that followed, receiving his Knight's Cross posthumously.

Men like Grascher kept a heavily reinforced Trufanov from being able to do more than slow down the contact between Das Reich and the 7th Panzer Division on July 15. Trufanov did, however, buy the time for most of the Soviet divisions to slip out of the closing German pincers.

By July 16, Hoth and Kempf were finally in a position to resume the push for Kursk.



TOP: Soviet T-34 tanks, supported by thousands of Red Army soldiers, advance rapidly during a counter-attack at Kursk. The resurgent Soviet military managed to contain the German offensive and later undertake its drive on Berlin. LEFT: Russian infantry service field artillery and fire small arms at attacking Germans in defense of the Kursk salient.

Although their divisions were largely intact, they were battered and their men were worn down, and 60 miles still lay between them and Model's northern pincer. Von Mellenthin stated, "Gross Deutschland was dangerously weak after heavy fighting lasting for 10 days, while the Russian striking power had not appreciably diminished. In fact, it seemed to have increased."

Indeed, the remaining 27th and 53rd Armies of Konev's Steppe Front alongside the fresh 4th Guards Tank Corps and 1st Mechanized Corps, with nearly 400 tanks, were closing in on Oboian and northwest of Prokhorovka. How they would have fared against VonManstein's reserves is a matter of speculation, for on July 17, VonManstein began his withdrawal. Zhukov noted, "Because of the exhaustion of our own First Tank Army and the Sixth and Seventh Guards field armies, the enemy was able to pull his main forces back to the Belgorod defense line by July 23." Inevitably, most of the German divisions were soon drawn into new battles against Soviet offensives elsewhere.

As exemplified by the elan of the German panzer formations at Oboian and Prokhorovka, the Germans inflicted deep wounds on the Soviets at Kursk while remaining themselves relatively unscathed. Together, Army Group Center and Army Group South lost 323 tanks and assault guns irreparably destroyed during the Kursk battles. Personnel losses amounted to 50,000 men killed, wounded, or missing. Red Army personnel losses amounted to at least 177,000, with combat losses between 20 and 70 percent of the units committed. Soviet tank and self-propelled assault gun losses amounted to 1,614 vehicles irreparably destroyed.

Losses to both the Germans and the Soviets in damaged armored vehicles were much higher than destroyed vehicles. By the time Wittmann's Tigers disengaged on the 17th,

Wittmann himself had accounted for 30 Soviet tanks and 28 antitank guns. From July 5-16, Das Reich alone knocked out 448 Soviet tanks and assault guns against a loss of 46 of its own. The 2nd SS Panzer Corps chalked up 1,149 Soviet tanks and other armored vehicles destroyed. The trend of high Soviet losses against those of the Germans would continue for a long time to come, and often at times be exceeded, as in future battles the Germans were usually on the defensive.

Nevertheless, the strategic consequences at Kursk were not lost on the German commanders. "With the failure of our supreme effort, the strategic initiative passed to the Russians. Kursk had been a complete and most regrettable failure," reflected VonMellenthin.

VonManstein commented, "When Citadel was called off, the initiative in the Eastern theatre of war finally passed to the Russians."

Guderian agreed, "By the failure of Citadel we suffered a decisive defeat."

Soviet propaganda naturally made the most of the Red Army victory by completely inflating the German losses. Zhukov wrote, "The picked and most powerful grouping of the Germans destroyed here [Kursk] ... the faith of the German Army and the German people in the Nazi leadership ... was irrevocably shattered."

Marshal Aleksandr M. Vasilevsky boasted of 500,000 German casualties. The massacre of Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army at Prokhorovka on July 12 was turned into the "Death Ride of the Fourth Panzer Army." The Soviets claimed 400 German tanks destroyed that day and 3,100 German tanks destroyed during the whole Kursk battle. The reality was rather the reverse, and German morale remained high, both among civilians at home and among the soldiers at the front.

Only the relatively recent declassification of Waffen SS combat records and the public accessibility of Russian archival material has revealed the true nature of Kursk: a brilliant tactical victory for the Germans, but a decisive strategic victory for the Soviets. □

In August 1943, immediately after the Battle of Kursk, the Red Army launched a series of follow-up operations, resulting in the liberation of a large swath of Nazi-occupied Soviet territory. However, by the end of September, the Soviet offensive ground to a halt against the great Ukrainian river Dnieper.

This major river was the centerpiece of the Panther-Wotan Line, or Eastern Wall, a grandiose German scheme to halt the Red Army. Adolf Hitler, in his directive on August 11, 1943, ordered the creation of the Panther-Wotan Line as the last bulwark stopping the Soviet onslaught. He was echoed by Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, who wrote in his diary on September 24: "We must try under all circumstances to hold the Dnieper line; in case we lose it, I wouldn't know where we might gain a new foothold."

The Panther section was the portion of the envisioned German line running north roughly from the area of Smolensk to the Baltic Sea. The Wotan portion, the larger segment, extended south from Smolensk to the Black Sea. Even though the Wehrmacht did not have the time, resources, or manpower to turn this into the impregnable wall envisioned by Hitler, it was a formidable natural obstacle, with the high western bank of the Dnieper River overlooking the other side.

Situated on the west bank of the Dnieper was the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, a major highway and railroad nexus. Rapid capture of this strategic objective would allow Soviet forces several options for further operations. The offensive in a northwesterly direction would threaten to cut the German front in two and drive a wedge between the German Army Groups Center and South. The advance southwest would position the Red Army at the Hungarian and Romanian borders. Turning south along the Dnieper River would threaten to cut off and destroy the bulk of the German forces in the Ukraine.

Two Soviet army groups, known as fronts, were advancing in the direction of Kiev. The Central Front, under General Konstantin K. Rokossovski, would brush

north of Kiev with its extreme left flank. However, the bulk of operations against Kiev would be conducted by the Voronezh Front under General Nikolai F. Vatutin. The two fronts were renamed the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian, respectively, on September 20.

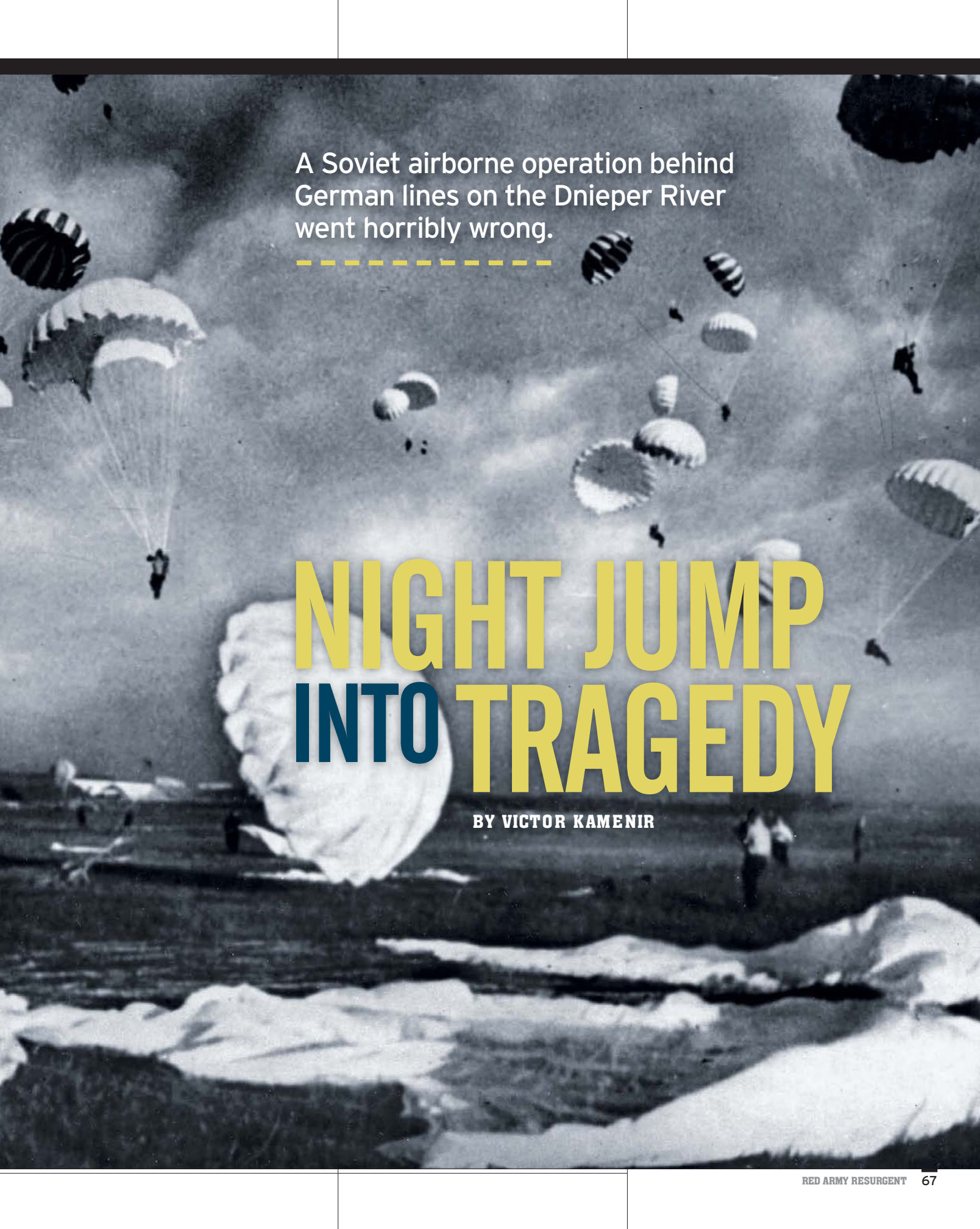
The Soviet offensive began on September 9, 1943, with the objective of reaching the Dnieper River by October 5. Unexpectedly, after securing Hitler's permission, the commander of Army Group South, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, gave orders on September 15 to retreat to the western side of the river.

As the German forces rapidly pulled back, the dash to Dnieper became a race as both Soviet and German units attempted to reach the river first, with combatants often moving along parallel routes. Even falling back rapidly, the Germans fought a series of sharp rearguard actions. Still, the leading elements of the 1st Ukrainian Front began approaching the river in the afternoon of September 21, ahead of schedule.



LEFT: Soviet airborne troops complete a practice jump prior to the opening of hostilities with the Germans. The Red Army pioneered the concept of paratroops in combat. **ABOVE:** Warily watching above, German soldiers take cover in a trench and await the arrival of enemy troops.





A Soviet airborne operation behind
German lines on the Dnieper River
went horribly wrong.

NIGHT JUMP INTO TRAGEDY

BY VICTOR KAMENIR

The jubilant but exhausted Red Army suffered heavy casualties during its summer offensive. Supply lines were overstretched, and many units were in dire need of refit and replacements. Skilled bridging units were lagging behind. Fuel was in such short supply that General Konstantin Malygin, commanding the IX Mechanized Corps in the Third Guards Tank Army, gave orders to take fuel from all nonessential vehicles, even artillery, to ensure that tanks and vehicles carrying motorized infantry had enough fuel to make the last jump to the Dnieper. Marshal Georgi Zhukov, representative of the Supreme Command overseeing operations of the 1st Ukrainian Front, wrote in his memoirs: “There was no opportunity for detailed preparation for the advance to the Dnieper. The forces ... were extremely fatigued by constant fighting.”

The leading units of Soviet Fortieth Army and Third Guards Tank Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front approached the river in the area of the so-called Bukrin Bend, roughly 180 miles south of Kiev. This east-facing bend in the river, named after two villages, the Big Bukrin and the Little Bukrin, was one of the few areas allowing the Soviet artillery to dominate the opposing bank. However, the rugged terrain within the Bukrin Bend, intersected by a multitude of deep ravines, prohibited maneuvers by mechanized units and greatly impeded all others. Still, the Soviet command concentrated one of its major efforts at this location because the terrain on the eastern bank allowed them to stage large forces unobserved by the Germans.

Attempting to capitalize on their momentum, small units of Red Army soldiers began crossing to the western bank almost as soon as they arrived. Due to the availability of only a few boats, some of the first assault parties were as small as five or six men. The next morning, September 22, the soldiers located a sunken ferry. It was raised and quickly patched up, and platoon-sized groups began moving across. German forces in the area were no more than a few scattered pickets, and a battalion of Soviet motorized infantry

National Archives



The unmistakable silhouette of a Soviet T-34 medium tank rushes forward in a combined arms attack with Red Army soldiers. The T-34 helped turn the tide of the war in the East in favor of the Soviets.

was able to occupy the village of Zarubentsy, at the tip of the bend, practically without firing a shot.

However, the Germans reacted quickly to this development, and the 19th Panzer Division was rushed south from Kiev. At the same time, the German XXIV Panzer Corps was retreating in good order to the east side of the river in the vicinity of Kanev, south of Bukrin Bend. Its leading division, the 34th Infantry, also hurried to the Soviet beachhead. By the end of the day, they began probing Red Army positions around Zarubentsy.

The fighting began in earnest on the morning of September 23. The two German divisions were greatly aided by difficult terrain and Soviet logistical challenges. The lack of sufficient river craft slowed Soviet buildup on the beachhead, while the Germans rushed forward elements from the XXIV and XLVII Panzer Corps. By September 26, nine German divisions bottled up and stalemated the Soviet forces in the Bukrin Bend, preventing them from breaking out.

Chief of Red Army General Staff, Marshal S.M. Shtemenko, wrote in retrospect: “It wouldn’t have been superfluous to plan an additional crossing of the Dnieper in the



vicinity of Kiev in case of a setback of the offensive from Bukrin beachhead. However, neither the General Staff, nor Front command, unfortunately, prepared this in advance.”

In mid-September, as the forces of the Voronezh Front were still hundreds of miles from the Dnieper, the Soviet Supreme Command ordered an airborne operation prepared in support of the ground forces. Three elite Guards airborne brigades, the 1st, 3rd, and 5th, from the Supreme Command reserve and totaling some 10,000 men, were grouped into a provisional corps under Major General Ivan Zatevakhin. A small number of staff officers was seconded from the Directorate of Airborne Troops to form Zatevakhin’s command element.

Commander of the Voronezh Front, General Nikolai F. Vatutin, was given the operational control of the airborne corps. His political deputy was none other than the future Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Planning for this operation was shrouded in utmost secrecy, with Marshal Zhukov, who was present at the headquarters of the Voronezh Front, signing off on the finished product on September 19.

The plan was extremely ambitious, given the level of equipment, supplies, and capabilities of units tasked with carrying it out. Still, it was very thorough, with the smallest detail meticulously worked out. General Vatutin’s task for the airborne corps was

to drop during the night of September 23-24 and establish a defensive perimeter immediately west of the Bukrin Bend to prevent German reinforcements from reaching the beachhead.

Aerial reconnaissance was to locate German forces in the area of the drop zones. Immediately prior to the commencement of operations, the Second Air Army supporting the 1st Ukrainian Front was to attack and suppress ground targets. Immediately after the drop, the front air forces were to switch to close support of paratroopers on the ground. Teams of liaison

“IT WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN SUPERFLUOUS TO PLAN AN ADDITIONAL CROSSING OF THE DNEIPEr IN THE VICINITY OF KIEV IN CASE OF A SETBACK OF THE OFFENSIVE FROM BUKRIN BEACHHEAD. HOWEVER, NEITHER THE GENERAL STAFF, NOR FRONT COMMAND, UNFORTUNATELY, PREPARED THIS IN ADVANCE.”

**-CHIEF OF RED ARMY GENERAL STAFF,
MARSHAL S.M. SHTEMENKO**

officers with their own radios and dedicated and redundant radio frequencies were established to ensure cooperation among the paratroopers, supporting aviation, and artillery assets. The landing itself would be conducted during two nights, with the 1st and the 5th Guards Airborne Brigades dropping first, followed by the 3rd Brigade the next night. The first two brigades were to be dropped at night 15 miles west of the Dnieper River and establish a defensive perimeter roughly 10 miles long by 15 miles deep.

The Long-Range Aviation Command provided the bulk of the 180 aircraft required to transport men and equipment. They were mainly Lisunov Li-2 planes, a

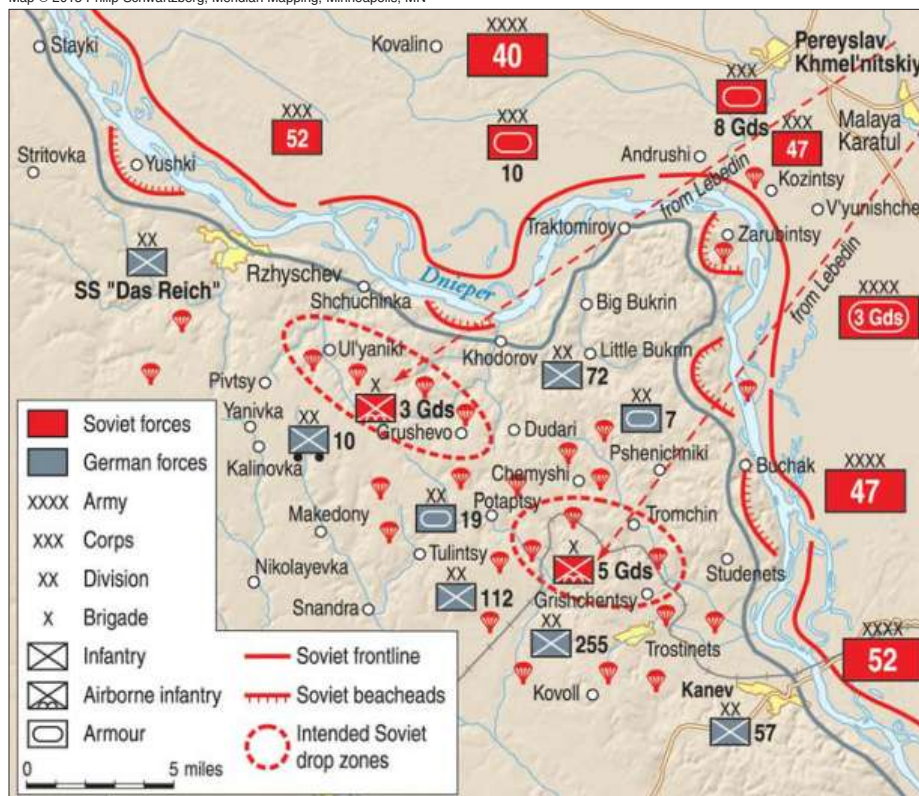
licensed copy of the American Douglas DC-3 plane, as well as 35 gliders. The aircraft would fly from a complex of five airfields near Lebedin, 110 to 140 miles from the proposed drop zones. To facilitate navigation and approaches to the target area, the aircraft were to utilize radio beacons that were already installed at the airfields. The reciprocal beacons were to be set up in the drop zones by the first elements of paratroopers to land.

To further assist navigation to the drop zones, upon landing, the designated paratroopers were to fire off prearranged sequences of multicolored flares and set up bonfires on the ground in certain configurations. In all, 500 sorties were to transport the two airborne brigades on the first night of operations. The heaviest weapons available to paratroopers, 45mm antitank guns, were to be delivered on the second night, with planes landing on rough runways laid out by men already on the ground. Paratroopers were to be on their own for two to three days until they linked up with ground forces.

The severe attrition of the first two years of war, with paratroopers often having to fight as regular infantry, whittled down the ranks of trained airborne soldiers. While the officer and NCO cadres of the three brigades contained some veterans of previous airborne operations, the majority of the rank and file had fewer than four practice jumps under their belts. Many of these men had never jumped from an aircraft before, having done their practice jumps from aerostats. Additionally, most of the men in the three airborne brigades were not volunteers and had been arbitrarily assigned to airborne units. Among thousands of men in each airborne brigade were also several dozen women, mainly doctors, nurses, and some radio operators. They jumped into combat alongside the men and shared all the dangers with them.

Discipline was strict. Any soldier found in dereliction of duty, conduct unbecoming, or refusing to jump was quickly shipped off to a penal battalion. A veteran of the 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade, Matvey Likhberman, at that time a radio

Map © 2015 Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis, MN



Ill-fated Soviet airborne operations resulted in heavy losses during the fighting around the great bend of the Dnieper River. Few Red Army paratroopers managed to survive weeks of fighting behind German lines.

operator in the antitank battalion, remembered that the majority of men in his battalion were aged between 18 and 22. Many years after the war, an interview with Likhberman was published on a Russian-language website. His reminiscences, as well as the memoirs of another participant, Grigoriy Chukhrai, were invaluable in describing the human aspect of the events that unfolded.

The combat kit of paratroopers was heavy, sometimes adding more than 80 pounds, plus their PD-42 parachutes. Likhberman remembered being armed with a carbine, 200 rounds of ammunition, six grenades, a knife, and a packet with American C-rations: "We did not have any incendiary grenades, riser cutters, entrenching tools.... We, the common paratroopers, did not have pistols or explosive charges, flashlights, flare guns."

He ruefully remembered instructions to bury the parachutes once on the ground, which would be difficult to do since they did not have entrenching tools. Likhberman was part of the two-man crew of a radio station. Incredibly, carrying the spare batteries and code book, he was assigned to one aircraft, while his partner, carrying the radio, was assigned to another. As a radioman, Likhberman was instructed in case of imminent capture to destroy his codebook and then commit suicide, since he had to memorize the call signs and frequencies used by the brigade.

The very success of the Soviet ground offensive caused the plan to begin to unravel. Masses of men and matériel, all moving in pursuit of retreating Germans, created great traffic snarls along the railroad networks. Traveling by train and caught in endless delays, the three airborne brigades arrived late to their staging areas. The planes earmarked to carry the paratroopers were slow in gathering as well. Large numbers of trains and convoys carrying precious aircraft fuel did not arrive on time, further limiting the number of sorties to be flown during the crucial first day of the operation. Bad weather with ground-hugging fog limited the effectiveness of aerial reconnaissance, and the immediate vicinity of the drop zones was not scrutinized.

General Vatutin and his staff spent most of the day of September 24 amending the plan, also delaying the operation by a day, to the night of September 25-26, to allow more men and resources to arrive. The 1st Guards Airborne Brigade, under Colonel I.P. Krasovskiy, hopelessly late, was replaced by the 3rd Brigade to be dropped during the first night. The drop zones were adjusted as well. The 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade under Colonel P.A. Goncharov was to land in the area southeast of the town of Rzhishev, while the 5th Guards Airborne Brigade, under Colonel P.M. Sidorchuk, was to drop northwest of the town of Kanev.

Brigade commanders received the amended orders on the morning of September 25, the day of the drop. As each command echelon passed down orders and instructions, each subsequent command level had less and less time to brief subordinates. Company commanders had 15 minutes before planes took off to brief platoon leaders, who, in turn, had to brief their soldiers while in flight.

At 6:30 PM on September 25, the planes carrying the leading elements of the 3rd Airborne Brigade took off from their airfields at 10-minute intervals. As the aircraft crossed to the west side of the Dnieper River, they encountered an unforeseen problem. The rain, which lasted most of the day, stopped around the time the operation started, but left behind a heavy haze, reducing visibility to less than three miles.

The first few aircraft carrying men of Likhtermann's unit arrived over their assigned drop zones and dropped their planeloads of paratroopers without interference from German anti-aircraft artillery. However, as more and more white parachutes blossomed overhead, German positions came alive. As the first Soviet pathfinders on the ground began firing off their prearranged sequences of flares, the Germans quickly caught on and began firing off multicolored flares of their own. Their trick had the desired effect, confusing many Soviet pilots overhead and causing them to drop their paratroopers in the wrong places.



ABOVE: Scanning the horizon from shoulder-deep entrenchments, German soldiers await an inevitable attack by the Soviets during the fighting along the Dnieper River in the autumn of 1943. This photo was snapped on October 4, prior to the onset of another brutal winter. **BELOW:** Crossing the Dnieper River under fire from heavy German weapons and small arms during a 1943 offensive, Red Army soldiers quickly discard their long paddles and exit large boats to return fire.



Likhterman remembers: “Three flares went up. A minute later the same three flares went up to our left, then to our right, and five minutes later the flares in the same color sequences went up all around us, and it was impossible to figure out who was sending them up and where the rally point was.”

Numerous German flak guns began firing, sending up a large volume of ordnance. Soviet pilots frantically maneuvered to gain altitude while continuing to drop their sticks of paratroopers. Instead of the planned 1,640 feet, many paratroopers were dropped from higher altitudes, further scattering the units. It took longer than planned to exit the aircraft as well, with so many green paratroopers making their first jump from a plane in combat conditions at night.

The slow-moving Soviet planes, caught in the beams of German search lights, were subjected to punishing flak. Likhterman and his few friends on the ground observed in horror.

“The drone of aircraft sounded overhead. And then it began!!! Hundreds of tracer bullets went up. It became light as day. The flak cannons coughed. A terrible tragedy unfolded over our heads. I don’t know where to find the words to describe what happened. We saw the whole nightmare. The incendiary tracers pierced the parachutes, which were made from [nylon and] would immediately burst in flames. Tens of burning torches immediately appeared in the sky. Our comrades were dying, burning up in the sky, without a chance to fight on the ground. We saw everything. Two shot-down ‘Douglases’ were falling, without having a chance to unload their paratroopers. The lads were dropping like stones from their planes without having a chance to open their parachutes. An Li-2 hit the ground 200 meters from us. We raced to the plane, but there were no survivors.... The whole area around us was covered in white smears of the parachutes. And bodies, bodies, bodies: killed, burnt, smashed paratroopers.”

Unknown to Likhterman, one of the

planes he observed falling in flames carried the commander of the 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade, Colonel Goncharov, who perished along with his staff.

In one of the following planes was Lieutenant Grigoriy Chukhrai, who later became a famous Soviet movie director. He remembered: “The events of that night are still in front of my eyes. The closer our plane got to the front lines, the angrier the flak guns sounded, searchlights probed the sky, illumination flares were continuously being launched. We were unlucky: we were dropping right over the flak guns.... I was falling toward a gleaming stream of tracers, through the flames of burning parachutes of my comrades.”

As mistake compounded on tragedy, the majority of paratroopers became scattered over an area 15 by 40 miles, with less than 10 percent of them actually landing within the designated drop zones. Over half of the Soviet soldiers landed within 10 miles of their targets, while some unfortunates were blown off course over 40 miles to the south. Dozens landed in the Dnieper River, and many drowned entangled in their parachutes. Incredibly, more than 100 men landed on the east bank, in friendly territory, and some landed inside the Soviet beachhead on the west side of the river.

The train carrying the compass locator system, which was to be set up at the beginning of the final approaches of the transport planes over the river, did not arrive at its designated position until after the operation was canceled. Likewise, the first paratroopers on the ground, almost immediately fighting for their lives, did not have time or opportunity to set up beacons at the drop zones. Therefore, Soviet navigators only had the river itself as the reference mark for keeping track of flight time to their targets. Lacking a single common reference point, several aircraft approaching on different vectors from five different airfields arrived at the river at different locations.

Unknown to Soviet intelligence, on September 25, two German divisions, one panzer and one mechanized, were moving through the Soviet drop zones on their way to reinforce German units in the Bukrin Bend. Whole detachments of Soviet airborne soldiers

THE RED ARMY PIONEERED AIRBORNE OPERATIONS BUT OFTEN FAILED TO EXECUTE MISSIONS SUCCESSFULLY.

The official history of Russian and Soviet airborne forces began on August 2, 1930, when 12 parachutists were dropped during maneuvers in the Moscow Military District. Prior to maneuvers, the volunteers conducted several practice jumps during their six days of training under the tutelage of Air Force pilot Leonid Minov. Minov himself had only three jumps under his belt, having received his training in the United States only a short time before.

This experiment created excitement among Soviet military theoreticians and commanders. The vertical dimension of airborne operations fit well within the overall framework of the Soviet “deep battle” concept, and the airborne forces expanded rapidly, numbering almost

10,000 men by 1935. That same year, during maneuvers in the Kiev Military District, 1,200 paratroopers were dropped in front of impressed foreign military observers. Airborne soldiers captured an airfield, allowing conventional infantry with light tanks and artillery to be flown in.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the Soviet airborne forces were an independent branch of the RKKA (Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army), subordinated directly to the Supreme Command. There were 10 airborne corps of three brigades plus several small formations, with five more in various formation stages. Each brigade of 3,000 men consisted of four airborne battalions, a mor-

found themselves landing right on top of German encampments, which were rapidly coming alive. The unfortunate airborne soldiers were decimated. Still, many brave souls fired their weapons and threw grenades on their way down to certain death.

Upon landing, Lieutenant Chukhrai hit the steep bank of a small ravine and tumbled down, wrapping himself in his parachute with his arms pinned to his sides. He temporarily lost consciousness, and when he came to he could hear “dogs barking and Germans’ guttural shouts” nearby. Twisting and turning, Chukhrai managed to reach his knife, cut himself loose, and scurry to shelter.

He recalled: “Two Germans appeared at the lip of the ravine. I saw them outlined against the sky. One of them fired a long burst at my parachute. Apparently, he thought that the paratrooper was still there. Only then they carefully began to approach the pile of my parachute and rucksack. As soon as they were sideways to me, I opened fire and cut both of them down. Then I took off running.”

The Soviet timetable was completely disrupted, and shuttling aircraft continued to drop paratroopers into the confusion. No longer need-

ing to maintain radio silence, Soviet air crews radioed in reports of an operation gone terribly wrong, supplemented by their verbal accounts once back at their

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tar battalion, antiaircraft machine-gun company, reconnaissance, sapper, and signal companies.

Combat deployment of airborne soldiers began soon after the German invasion; however, missions were small in scale, tactical in nature, and for most soldiers it was a one-way trip. For example, on July 14, 1941, a company of 64 men from the 214th Airborne Brigade was dropped near Mogilev. Their mission was to destroy a small German convoy, which was halted to refuel. After engaging the enemy, 34 paratroopers returned; the rest were killed or captured.

During 1941, airborne forces were often deployed in a regular infantry role. Only after the Germans were repulsed at Moscow and the Soviet forces went on the offensive at the end of the year did the airborne forces begin taking an offensive role.

The largest Soviet airborne operation of World War II took place during fighting around Vyazma in January and February 1942. German forces were partially surrounded, and the Soviet command developed a plan to cut them off. Over a period of nine days, more than 7,300 paratroopers were dropped under adverse weather conditions. The operation was a disaster, with the majority of airborne troopers becoming surrounded themselves. The depleted survivors fought their way out during the next several months.

After the Dnieper operation, there were further small-scale missions; however, the airborne forces continued fighting primarily in an infantry role. Airborne soldiers were dropped in actions against Japan in 1945 as well. In that theater of operations their missions were largely to secure territory rather than take it from the enemy.

Waffen SS troops man their MG-42 near the Dnieper River on October 8, 1943. The armed wing of the SS, these troops were often fanatical Nazis who fought to the death. A disabled Soviet tank lies in the background.

airfields. The discovery of enemy divisions already in the drop zones made the whole operation irrelevant, and the Soviet commanders cancelled the remainder.

By the time the operation was called off, just under 300 sorties had been flown instead of the 500 planned for the first night. Instead of two full brigades, slightly over 4,500 men were dropped. The 3rd Airborne Brigade was deployed in its entirety but without its 45mm guns. Roughly half the 5th Airborne Brigade was dropped before the mission was called off. Almost 600 soft containers with equipment, supplies, and ammunition were parachuted as well.

In addition to frontline combat formations in transit through the area, several thousand

German security troops were staged near the drop zones in preparation for an unrelated anti-partisan operation. Among these security troops was at least one battalion from the Turkestan Legion, formed by the Germans from Soviet Muslim POWs, natives of Central Asian republics. Several smaller detachments of local Ukrainian police were present as well. These security troops responded quickly and began sweeping the area for paratroopers.

Confused fighting raged on the ground as many Red Army men perished alone or in small groups and a number were captured. Still, the survivors fought on and began gathering in groups large enough to offer resistance. NCOs and junior officers took command of scattered units, while some commanders landed without any troops to lead. Colonel Sidorchuk, commander of the 5th Brigade, landed in the Kanev woods alone and did not find any of his men until daylight.

Paratroopers landing in the heavily wooded areas near Kanev and Cherkassy fared better than others, finding more cover and concealment. Their comrades who landed on the northern side of the drop zone near Rzhyshev found fewer defensible positions. Those soldiers who managed to reach their designated rally points often found no one to direct them further. As groups formed, they moved off in different directions without coordination.

It was absolutely vital for lightly armed paratroopers to find their air-dropped supply containers with equipment and ammunition. However, the Germans also actively hunted for them. In some instances, the Germans set up ambushes near discovered containers, inflicting heavy casualties on paratroopers attempting to retrieve them.

The next several days became a nightmare of running fights, as survivors attempted to organize. The Germans deployed spotter aircraft to attack larger groups of paratroopers from the air and to guide their ground forces.

Soviet partisans, though hard-pressed themselves, attempted to contact and bring in scattered paratroopers. Besides the physical danger, paratroopers were

dropped without food. Many men, cautious about lighting fires or going into villages, gathered raw corn or dug up raw potatoes to dull their hunger pangs.

As the brutal sweep for paratroopers continued, many captured soldiers were executed immediately. Local villagers giving aid or shelter to paratroopers were killed as well. Paratroopers hiding in barns or houses were sometimes burned alive when the structures were torched. As groups of airborne soldiers maneuvered through the area, they often came across the mutilated bodies of their comrades. German authorities offered local residents monetary rewards for turning in paratroopers, and some Judases collected their pieces of silver.

Still, heroism was not in short supply, not only among soldiers but civilians as well. On the night of the drop, Captain Sapozhnikov wrapped the flag of his 5th Brigade around his body. While in the air on the way down, the captain was hit in the leg and shoulder. Several soldiers found the unconscious captain and hid him in a haystack. The next morning the soldiers were discovered by a 15-year-old villager, Anatoliy Ganenko. The brave teenager took the soldiers to his mother, Serafima Ganenko, and together they sheltered and aided the soldiers for several days. After the wounded captain regained some strength, the soldiers decided to attempt to break out and reach the Soviet lines.

To avoid risking the flag, they left it with the Ganenkos. When the victorious Red Army liberated the area two months later, the mother and son turned over the flag to authorities. In 1976, more than 30 years after the war, following a petition from the airborne soldiers, Serafima and Anatoliy Ganenko received medals "for bravery."

Paratroopers were not able to establish radio communications with their command elements back on the east bank of the river for several days. Aerial reconnaissance and partisans undoubtedly reported that there were still plenty of survivors, desperately fighting and out of touch with their headquarters. During the next week, three more groups of paratroopers with radios were dropped. Most sources reported that these men disappeared without checking in, doubtless victims of German sweeps. On September 27, the southern detachment of paratroopers finally established tenuous radio contact with 1st Ukrainian Front headquarters.

On the north side of the drop zone, Major Lev gathered almost 100 soldiers, including Lieutenant Chukhrai. After losing many men in running fights with the Germans, their detachment was soon found by partisans. Once they had a chance to catch their breath, Major Lev ordered Chukhrai and two soldiers to attempt to reach higher headquarters and receive orders. It is apparent that neither Major Lev's detachment nor the partisan band had radio communications with the higher echelons.

After several difficult days of travel, Chukhrai and his companions managed to cross the front lines, navigate the river, and report in. Chukhrai's two companions were sent back with orders for Major Lev, while the future film director was kept on the Soviet side to help identify paratrooper stragglers dribbling in. From these survivors Lieutenant Chukhrai eventually learned that Major Lev's group had been wiped out.

As the days wore on, more and more paratroopers banded together. In the south, Colonel Sidorchuk, commander of the 5th Airborne Brigade, gathered almost 1,200 men in the Cherkassy woods, and roughly 1,000 more men were still alive around the northern drop zone. Overall, more than 40 groups were scattered in the drop zones, some of them as small as a dozen men, others larger than 200.

The majority of these groups were too large to hide and too small to defend themselves, and most of the men who survived the first few days around the northern drop zone eventually perished or were taken prisoner. Likhterman recalled how his group was destroyed. Initially, they attempted to fight to the river, hoping either to link up with other Soviet soldiers or to swim across. However, the German cordon was too tight and the beleaguered paratroopers bounced from one firefight to the next. Casualties mounted, and ammunition was dwindling. A dozen survivors were finally bottled up in a small



Shooting skyward along the Dnieper River, this German 20mm flak gun, situated atop a Sdkfz. 10 towing vehicle, has spotted a Soviet target.

ravine and taken prisoner. They were out of grenades and had only a few rounds of ammunition. After almost six harrowing months of imprisonment, Likhberman managed to escape and rejoin the advancing Red Army.

The few remaining officers, led by Colonel Sidorchuk, worked hard at reorganizing the survivors. By early October, his roughly 1,200 paratroopers were formed into a provisional brigade of three battalions, plus four specialist platoons—reconnaissance, communications, combat engineers, and antitank (recoilless rifle).

Once communications with the headquarters of the 1st Ukrainian Front became firmly established, Sidorchuk's force started receiving combat missions. Often in conjunction with partisans, paratroopers attacked German infrastructure and small units, carried out ambushes and acts of sabotage, and conducted thorough reconnaissance. A rough landing strip was laid out in the woods, allowing planes from the Soviet side to land in the occupied territory, bringing in supplies and instructions and taking out small numbers of wounded.

Fighting in the Bukrin Bend stalemated during October. The Soviet Twenty-seventh and Fortieth Armies, plus the Third Guards Tank Army, were in firm control of the Bukrin Bend. However, they were unable to break through determined German defenses. After reevaluating the situation, Zhukov and Vatutin shifted the main axis of attack to beachheads closer to Kiev, especially the Lutezh beachhead just north of

the city. In a feat of operational skill, the 3rd Guards Tank Army was secretly withdrawn from Bukrin Bend, transferred to the east side of the river, and shifted north to Lutezh.

On November 3, Soviet ground forces launched a massive pincer offensive at Kiev, supported by Second Air Army. After hard fighting, the Ukrainian capital was liberated; and on the morning of November 6, Zhukov, Khrushchev, and Vatutin sent Stalin a congratulatory telegram, announcing liberation of the city.

**IN SOME INSTANCES,
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RETRIEVE THEM.**

Surviving paratroopers under Colonel Sidorchuk continued fighting in Bukrin Bend. During the night of November 13, in a coordinated attack with other Army units, they broke through German defenses and linked up with Soviet troops. In late November, still over 1,000 men strong, survivors of the 3rd and 5th Guards Airborne Brigades were returned to Moscow.

Even though the airborne operation did not unfold as planned, the presence of paratroopers in the German rear had a significant effect on the fighting in Bukrin Bend. Their operations pinned down significant German forces that otherwise would have been used against the Red Army forces in the beachhead. Three Red Army soldiers—Major A. Bluvshstein, Senior Lieutenant S. Petrosyan, and Private I. Kondratyev—were awarded their country's highest combat decoration, Hero of the Soviet Union. □



BRIDGEHEAD

A battle-hardened German panzergrenadier makes his way through the town of Zhytomyr, Ukraine, in December 1943. Around Nikopol, the Wehrmacht and the Red Army fought for control of some of the richest mines in the world.

OF DEATH

BY PAT MCTAGGART

The Soviet Red Army fought the Nazis for control of some of the world's richest ore deposits.

AT first, it was all about the ore. Magnesium, iron, and manganese ore were the lifeblood of German industry, especially the armaments industry, which used the iron and manganese to produce steel for Hitler's war machine. Magnesium was one of the main aerospace construction metals and was used extensively in German aircraft production. It was also used as a lining for the massive furnaces in the iron and steel works.

Located in the southern Ukraine, the town of Nikopol was the center of one of the largest manganese ore basins in the western Soviet Union. Some 50 miles northwest of Nikopol, the town of Krivoi Rog sat atop an equally large iron ore basin. The entire area had been developed under the czars, and after the Communist takeover the ore taken from its mines served to build up the Red Army, Air Force, and Navy.

When German forces crossed the Soviet border on June 22, 1941, the forces of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South smashed through Russian frontier defenses and fanned out across the steppe, taking hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers and leaving thousands more dead on the battlefield.

One of the units in von Rundstedt's army group was General Werner Kempf's XLVIII Panzerkorps. In August, Kempf's armored and motorized forces were moving toward the ore-rich areas at Krivoi Rog and Nikopol. As the Germans advanced, Soviet troops and civilians worked frantically to dismantle entire factories and transport them to locations east of the Ural Mountains. Kempf's Panzerkorps stood on the west bank of the Dnieper River by the end of the month, having taken both towns as his troops drove further eastward.

Close on the heels of the victorious German troops came teams of engineers tasked with repairing the devastation left behind by the Russians. They were part of the Hermann Göring Werke, an organization formed by Luftwaffe chief Göring and some industrial cronies in the early days of Hitler's regime. A Reich-owned enterprise, the Hermann Göring Werke operated mines, steel works, and other industries in conquered countries across Europe.

Once the Krivoi Rog and Nikopol operations were running again, Russian iron ore and magnesium fueled the German war machine. A huge factory in Nikopol was adorned with the Hermann Göring Werke logo, and trains filled with ore left the town daily, headed west toward the furnaces of the Reich.

The waning months of 1943 saw German fortunes in Russia turn dramatically from those heady days of 1941. After the massive battle at Kursk in July, the Soviets launched a series of attacks in southern Russia that sent the Germans reeling westward. By late August, Red Army forces were nearing Smolensk on Army Group Center's right flank.

Farther south, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group South was forced to give up Kharkov on August 23. The wily field marshal immediately ordered General Hermann Breith's III Panzerkorps to counterattack the Soviet forces that were pushing west from Kharkov. In a series of sharp, bloody engagements, the III Panzerkorps hit the 1st Tank and 6th Guards Armies near Bododukhov, stopping them dead in their tracks. The commander of the Voronezh Front, General Nikolai Fedorovich Vatutin, was forced to move his 5th Tank Army into the fray, effectively bringing plans for a quick thrust westward to a halt for several days.

When Vatutin resumed his offensive, the III Panzerkorps kept nipping at the Russian flanks like a terrier. Meanwhile, Hitler flew to meet von Manstein at Vinnitsa, which had once been the Führer's headquarters in the Ukraine. Von Manstein, blunt as ever, gave Hitler the cold, hard

facts. His army group had suffered 133,000 casualties in August alone but had received only 33,000 replacements. The Soviets, while suffering greater casualties, could replace them with men pressed into service from the newly liberated areas and by transferring units from other sectors.

“Summing up the present situation, I insisted that while the Donetz [River] could not be held with the forces now available, the far greater danger for the German southern wing as a whole lay on the northern wing of our Army Group,” von Manstein later wrote in his memoirs. “[The] 8th and 4th Panzer Armies would be unable in the long run to prevent the enemy from breaking through to the Dnieper [River].”

The field marshal then gave Hitler a choice—send at least 12 new divisions to the Army Group immediately and replace worn-out divisions with ones from quieter sectors on the front or abandon the Donetz Line. Hitler agreed with von Manstein and promised more forces. The promise was never kept.

While the Führer and his field marshal talked, the Soviets were once again on the move. During the final days of August, the Forty-Fourth Army of General Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin’s South Front took Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov. Battered elements of the German XXIX Armeekorps, ordered to hold the city, managed to make their way through the Soviet lines while suffering heavy casualties in the process.

As August drew to a close, Soviet forces on the southern wing of the Eastern Front outnumbered the Germans about two-to-one in manpower and had an even larger ratio advantage in tanks, aircraft, and artillery. While von Manstein continued to plead with Hitler for freedom of movement, his divisions were being bled dry by the Russian juggernaut. Worse was to follow.

During the first week of September, Army Group South was forced to give up the towns of Putivl (severing the Bryansk–Konotop rail line and breaking the communications line between Army

Group Center and Army Group South), Artemovsk, Konotop, Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, and Konstantinivka. At the same time General Erwin Jaenicke’s Seventeenth Armee, which held a bridgehead on the Kuban Peninsula, was given permission to begin withdrawing across the Kerch Strait to the Crimea. Later in the war, a Soviet general would refer to the Crimea as “our largest prisoner-of-war camp.” When the Crimea was cut off by the Soviets later in the month, the Seventeenth Armee would be effectively out of the battle for good.

There seemed to be no stopping the Red Army as it continued to surge forward in the second week of September. First, the cities of Stalino and Krasnoarmyansk fell, followed by Mariupol and Barvenkovo. On the Kuban Peninsula, the 250,000 soldiers of the Seventeenth Armee continued their successful evacuation, giving more than half the coastline of the Sea of Azov to the Soviets.

During the second week of September, while city after city was being liberated by Russian troops, von Manstein met with Hitler at Zaporozhye. Von Manstein once again stressed the serious situation that Army Group South was facing. “I emphasized that the position on the Army Group’s right wing could not be restored forward of the Dnieper,” he wrote in his memoirs.

Once again Hitler listened, and once again he refused to face reality. He did, however, order Army Group Center to send von Manstein four divisions that would start moving south on September 17.

Before those divisions arrived, the situation in the south grew even worse. General Rodion Iakovlevich Malinovsky’s Southwest Front’s Sixth Army captured Lozovaya on the 16th and Tolbukhin’s South Front’s Forty-Fourth Army took Berdyansk on the 17th, forcing General Karl Hollidt’s Sixth Armee back to defenses near Melitopol. By September 21, the First Panzerarmee had been pushed back to the Dnepropetrovsk bridge-

**ONCE AGAIN HITLER LISTENED,
AND ONCE AGAIN HE REFUSED
TO FACE REALITY.**



National Archives

head and Sinelnikovo had fallen to the Southwest Front.

The final week in September saw the Germans in southern Russia lose even more ground. Although the Soviets paid a heavy price for their success, Poltava and Dnepropetrovsk were taken and Kremenchug was liberated after a bloody fight. Von Manstein was able to establish a tenuous line behind the Dnieper, but his army group had been severely mangled, with many of his divisions reporting a combat strength of less than a reinforced regiment.

At the beginning of October, von Manstein moved his headquarters from Kirovograd to Hitler's former headquarters at Vinnitsa as the Red Army continued to push westward. By October 5, General Vasilii Ivanovich Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army was involved in heavy fighting near Dnepropetrovsk. In the Kuban, the final elements of the Seventeenth Armee evacuated the Taman Peninsula, making the short journey across the Kerch Strait to the Crimea.

On October 10, Malinovsky's Southwest Front unleashed a three-pronged attack on the Zaporozhye bridgehead, about 20 miles northeast of Nikopol. While Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army hit the center of the bridgehead, supported on his left flank by General Dmitrii Danilovich Leliushenko's Third Guards Army, General Aleksei Ilich Danilov's Twelfth Army attacked from the north. As the Soviets pressed forward, they were met by a steel curtain of fire from the Germans.

Defending the bridgehead were the men of General Ferdinand Schörner's XL Panzerkorps and the XVII Armeekorps commanded by Maj. Gen. Hans Kreysing. An early Soviet penetration of the bridgehead's perimeter was eliminated by a German counter-attack. Regrouping, the Russians pounded the German positions with a massive barrage.

The Soviet artillery was grouped into division-sized units that augmented regular army divisional artillery batteries. The results of the massed artillery division fire were a clear indication that the Red Army now had the upper hand in guns and ammunition.

By October 11, General Eberhard von Mackensen, commander of the First Panzerarmee, told von Manstein that the bridgehead could no longer be held. Red Army attacks and Soviet artillery were causing unacceptable casualties for the Germans defending it. The next day the German line began to crumble, and by the 13th Soviet forces were involved in heavy fighting around the large hydroelectric dam that spanned the Dnieper.

On October 14, von Manstein contacted the German Army High Command, saying he was ordering the bridgehead to be abandoned. This was a moot point since Soviet advance units had already fought their way into Zaporozhye and street fighting was occurring inside the city. Rearguard German units held the Russians at bay in other



ABOVE: Pausing briefly during their retreat from the Red Army, exhausted soldiers of the German 18th Army may appear to be demoralized. However, plenty of fight remained in these veteran troops. **OPPOSITE:** Wheeling a field artillery piece into position, Soviet soldiers begin the famous "mud offensive" against the German salient at Korsun on the Dnieper River. The offensive was directed by General Ivan Konev.

sectors until the battered divisions inside the bridgehead could start pulling back to the west.

Heavy fighting was also taking place around Melitopol, where Hollidt's Sixth Armee was engaged with General Vasilii Filippovich Gerasimenko's Twenty-Eighth Army. By October 18, the Russians had

fought their way to the center of the city and were still pushing forward. Hollidt reported to von Manstein that his depleted units could not possibly hold the city. While Soviet artillery blasted German positions with devastating effect, the Twenty-Eighth Army, supported by General Iakov Grigorevich Kreizer's Fifty-First Army, took the city on October 28.

Meanwhile, Stavka (Stalin and the Soviet High Command) went through a redesignation process with its fronts. Vatutin's Voronezh Front was renamed the 1st Ukrainian Front, while General Ivan Stepanovich Konev's Steppe Front became the 2nd Ukrainian Front. Malinovsky's Southwest Front was redesignated the 3rd Ukrainian Front, and Tolbukhin's South Front became the 4th Ukrainian Front.

The loss of Melitopol put Hollidt's Sixth Armee in full retreat. Stubborn rearguard actions slowed the Soviets, but they could not hold them back. By the end of October, the Sixth Armee was trying to reestablish a tenuous line about 50 miles east of the Dnieper, but the terrain was totally unsuitable for forming a cohesive defense.

While Tolbukhin's troops advanced in the south, General Pavel Aleksevich Rot-

mistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army, with General Mikhail Nikolaevich Sharokhin's Thirty-Seventh Army in support, started a headlong rush to reach Krivoi Rog. Rotmistrov's armored and mechanized forces sliced through the German line, but a counterattack by Colonel Wend von Wiethersheim's 11th Panzer Division hit the Soviet advance forces as they moved into the town. Von Wiethersheim's Panther tanks, supported by Panzer IVs and assault guns, smashed into the Soviet flank, leaving a trail of burning Russian tanks in their wake and causing Rotmistrov to hastily order his forward elements to retreat.

For the moment the threat to Krivoi Rog, and consequently to Nikopol, was contained, but the following day Dnepropetrovsk fell. Once again Rotmistrov ordered his tanks forward as Soviet forces poured across the Dnieper through the newly liberated city. The depth of the Russian penetration was considerable, and while Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army rolled toward Krivoi Rog, Soviet infantry spread out across the steppe.

Coupled with advances farther south, Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, commander of Army Group A, ordered his Seventeenth Armee to evacuate the Crimea before the peninsula was completely cut off by the 4th Ukrainian Front. The order was immediately countermanded by Hitler, leaving the 17th to rot until Russian forces were able to turn their attention to that forlorn army.

Near Krivoi Rog, heavy rains forced Rotmistrov to slow his advance. While Hollidt's Sixth Armee formed a bridgehead east of Nikopol, Schörner's depleted XL Panzerko-

**HITLER HAD NOW BECOME
OBSESSED WITH HOLDING THE
RICH ORE DEPOSITS AT NIKOPOL
AND KRIVOI ROG.**





ABOVE: The Soviet Red Army committed substantial forces to a series of bitter battles in order to wrest the rich magnesium mines of Nikopol from the invading Germans. **OPPOSITE:** Early in 1944, camouflaged German field artillery positions are poised to offer support for advancing Wehrmacht troops.

rps launched a fierce counterattack against Rotmistrov. Meanwhile, General Friedrich Mieth's IV Armeekorps burst out of the Nikopol bridgehead to hit the right flank of the 4th Ukrainian Front, sending the Soviets reeling back.

By the end of the month, the Soviet commanders, while not achieving all their goals, could be satisfied with their gains. The Dnieper had been crossed north of Nikopol, and the Germans were barely holding on in their improvised positions west of the river. In the far south, Russian tanks reached Perekop, sealing the land bridge to the Crimea and effectively isolating the Seventeenth Armee. October had been a good month for the Red Army in southern Russia, but there was still more to do.

Hitler was determined to hang on to the mines, depriving the Red Army of their wealth. On October 25, he entrusted the defense of the bridgehead to Schörner.

Born in Munich in 1892, Schörner volunteered for the Bavarian Army when he dropped out of school at the age of 18. He completed his schooling after his service period and rejoined the army as an officer when World War I broke out, being assigned to the Alpine Korps. In the bloody battles on the Western Front, including the Battle of Verdun, Schörner showed his personal courage. When the Alpine Korps was transferred to the Italian Front, Schörner earned the Pour le Mérite (Blue Max) in the campaign during which a young Erwin Rommel earned the same award.

After the war he served in the Freikorps (Free Corps) battling communist militants. In 1920, he joined the Reichswehr (post-World War I German Army) and was posted to a mountain regiment. His unit was involved in smashing Adolf Hitler's 1923 putsch, but when Hitler was released after a short prison term Schörner became an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party.

During the first part of World War II, Schörner served in Poland, France, and Belgium as commander of the 98th Gebirgs (Mountain) Regiment. After he was given command of the 6th Gebirgs Division, he was awarded the Ritterkeuz (Knight's Cross) for action in Greece. He fought in the Arctic sector on the Eastern Front from 1941-1943 before being given command of the XL Panzerkorps.

Schörner had the reputation of being a tough and ruthless commander. An average tactician, he was known for pursuing his mission with the tenacity of a bulldog, but his

membership in the Nazi Party and his loyalty to Hitler also gave him an edge that many German commanders did not have. When the occasion demanded, he was able to persuade Hitler to change his mind about total defense or no retreat orders. At times he had disobeyed direct orders from the Führer and suffered no consequences in doing so.

When Schörner took command of the bridgehead, the Soviets had already occupied the Dnieper Line from north of Zaporozhye to west of Cherkassy. Red Army forces held a large area in Army Group Center's sector. The cost had been high on both sides, but the Red Army still held a remarkable advantage in men and equipment.

Von Manstein's Army Group South had 44 infantry divisions with about 140,000 combat troops, 2,200 artillery pieces of varying calibers, and 270 tanks and assault guns. Von Kleist's Army Group A consisted of 17 infantry divisions (many of them bottled up in the Crimea) with 54,000 combat troops, 800 artillery pieces, and about 100 assault guns and tanks. The Panzer divisions in the two army groups were in no better shape.

Facing the Germans were the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Ukrainian Fronts and the North Caucasus Front. The rifle units in the combined fronts totaled 899,000 combat infantry and were supported by 4,250 tanks and 9,300 artillery pieces.

The Nikopol bridgehead was a tenuous position at best. With a perimeter of about 75 miles, the deepest portion of the German bulge was only about nine miles from the eastern bank of the Dnieper. Inside the bridgehead were two armee korps—Mieth's IV and General Erich Brandenberger's XXIX—both subordinated to Schörner's command. A third korps, the XVII under command of General Hans Kreysing, would later be added to what became known as Gruppe Schörner.

Elements of Malinovsky's 3rd and Tolbukhin's 4th Ukrainian Fronts were given the task of eliminating the bridgehead. The Soviets had superiority in the air and on the ground, but they faced what was left of the German defenses known as the Dnieper

Line. Although the Germans had good field fortifications within the bridgehead, the land itself favored neither attacker nor defender. Much of the area within and in front of the bridgehead consisted of extensive marshy lowlands known as the Plavna, which was crisscrossed by several waterways. Due to the relative warmth of the winter in southern Russia, the marshes were hardly ever frozen.

Getting into and out of the bridgehead was a problem for the Germans. The Dnieper was between 650 and 1,300 yards wide in the area. To supply the troops on the east bank the Germans had constructed a temporary bridge east of Nikopol. On the southern end of the bridgehead near Bolshaya Lepatikha, two single-lane pontoon bridges had also been constructed by German engineers. These three bridges, which were guarded by flak (antiaircraft) companies, would be the lifeline for Schörner's troops.

Getting material to the Nikopol sector presented another problem to the already taxed German supply system. The so-called Road IV, the only all-weather road in the entire sector, was of little use as it was already under Soviet artillery fire. There was one railroad line in the area not under Russian control, but that supply source was also in peril. An advance of a mere 30 miles by Malinovsky's front would take the town of Apostolova and the vital rail spur that branched off to Nikopol.

Hitler had now become obsessed with holding the rich ore deposits at Nikopol and Krivoi Rog. He also envisioned the Nikopol bridgehead as a springboard for an attack to relieve the Crimea once the Soviets had been defeated trying to overcome Schörner's defenses. No one in Berlin dared to shatter that illusion, but commanders at the front such as von Mackensen and von Manstein knew the task set before them was next to impossible. The colored pins on maps at the Führer's headquarters represented full divisions. At the front, those same pins represented nothing more than brigades or reinforced regiments. Fiction and reality were separated by 1,000 miles.

There was one spot of good news for Gruppe Schörner. In the first week of November, Brig. Gen. Maximilian Freiherr von Edelsheim's 24th Panzer Division arrived inside the bridgehead after taking part in late October counterattacks around Krivoi Rog. The 24th had been destroyed at Stalingrad and was reconstituted about a week later around a cadre of support units and those who had been wounded and evacuated or flown out of the dying city.

The division was headquartered across the Dnieper from Nikopol in the village of Znamenka. From there, its 60 tanks and three motorized infantry battalions could send combat groups to any part of the perimeter that was in danger. Known as the "Stalingrad" Division, the 24th would be Schörner's "fire brigade" in the coming months as the Soviets slammed into the German defenses again and again.

The Soviet Front commanders facing the bridgehead did not have many options open to them as they planned to eliminate the Germans. It was obvious that the supply bridges would have to be the main goal of any attack, and the low cloud cover combined with the flak batteries defending the bridges meant that it was improbable that the Red Air Force could effectively destroy them. That left only frontal attacks on the German defenses—a slow and costly business considering how Schörner's men were dug in.

Neither of the Russian generals would flinch at the idea. Tolbukhin was born in 1894, the son of a peasant. Participating in the massive battles of World War I, he joined the Red Army in 1918 and served in a number of positions during the Russian Civil War. Tolbukhin graduated from the prestigious Frunze Academy in 1935 and went on to perform staff duties during the first part of World War II. He commanded the Fifty-Seventh Army during the Battle of Stalingrad and was promoted to a front commander in March 1943.

Malinovsky was cut from the same cloth as Tolbukhin. The illegitimate son of a railroad worker and a hospital cook, he was born in Odessa in 1895. He was a veteran of World War I, served in the Red Army during the Civil War, and graduated from the Frunze Academy in 1930. After fighting in the Spanish Civil War he went on to command a corps and two armies before becoming a front commander.

The first days of November brought a lull to the Nikopol area, as late fall rains made the maneuver of large units next to impossible. Both sides continued to send out patrols to ascertain their opponent's strengths and weaknesses, and sometimes those patrols ran into each other, causing short, sharp firefights.

On November 6, the commander of the Forty-Fourth Army, Lt. Gen. Vasilii Afanasevich Khomenko, and his senior artillery commander were on one such reconnaissance mission. Khomenko wanted to get a closer look at the defenses of Brig. Gen. Erich Gruener's 111th Infanterie Division. His reconnaissance vehicle inadvertently crossed into German territory and came under fire, which left Khomenko severely wounded. The Soviet general died the same day. Inside his vehicle, men of Gruener's Grenadier Regiment 50 found a trove of maps and documents detailing plans of attack and Soviet troop displacements that allowed the Germans to make defensive adjustments for the coming Russian attack.

As the Germans waited for the Soviets to strike, work continued on three defensive lines inside the bridgehead. The primary line was called the Adele I Line. Secondary positions to the rear were dubbed the Sigrid Line, and a third line near the Dnieper, nicknamed Ursula, would be used in case of a major Soviet breakthrough or as a final barrier in case the order was given to abandon the bridgehead.

The lull did not last for long. Along Mieth's IV Armee Korps' front, the Soviets tried a frontal attack with a combined armor-infantry force. The attack hit Brig. Gen. Friedrich-August Weinknecht's 79th Infanterie Division and its neighboring divisions on November 5. Antitank fire destroyed some of the Russian tanks, but there were always others to take their place to continue the attack.



ABOVE: During a visit to the field headquarters of Army Group South on February 19, 1943, Hitler and his field marshals confer over a map of the current tactical situation. From left, the group includes, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Hitler, Field Marshal Theodor Busse (behind).

To Weinknecht's left, Brig. Gen. Eugen Bleyer's 258th Infanterie Division had a portion of its forward position overrun. On the 79th's right, Brig. Gen. Paul Schrecker's 17th Infanterie Division also experienced heavy frontal attacks. The Soviets hoped to bludgeon their way through the German lines by throwing waves of tanks and infantry against the enemy defenses. It proved to be a costly tactic.

The attack lasted for two days. Red Army artillery pounded the German lines, lifting only when the ground troops were perilously close to the impact points. Such bombardment caused Soviet casualties from friendly fire, but it also forced the Germans to remain under cover instead of firing at the oncoming Russians.

The Soviets managed to break through in some areas, but elements of the 24th Panzer Division were used with great effectiveness in destroying the enemy penetrations. One of the keys to the German success was the lack of Russian armored infantry units, which could have been used to advance with the tanks when the German defenses had been breached.

At Nikopol, once the Soviet tanks were through the German forward line, they fell prey to tank or antitank fire in defenses further to the rear. The advancing Red Army infantry could not keep up with their tanks, leaving both armor and infantry unable to support each other. Therefore, each formation could be engaged by the combined arms of German battle groups, forcing the surviving Soviets to retreat and allowing the lines of the bridgehead to be restored.

On November 8, the 111th Infanterie Division fought off two attacks. Switching tactics, the Russians launched a night attack in battalion strength that was able to penetrate the German line. The following day, the understrength batteries of German Assault Gun Battalion 209 counterattacked. Supported by some scattered infantry units, the assault guns decimated the Russians and sealed the breach before Soviet reinforcements could arrive.

After licking their wounds, the Russians began another assault on the IV Armee Korps. On November 19, Soviet artillery hit the German line with a particularly heavy barrage. Holding a front of about 10 miles, Weinknecht's 79th Division struggled to hang on as waves of Red Army infantry advanced. The 79th had few reserve forces, and the German general knew that any help he received would have to come from neighboring divisions if a dangerous breakthrough occurred.

By November 20, the Russians had pierced the line of the division's Grenadier Regiment 212. Pushing forward, the Soviets managed to take the villages of Veselyi and Nezamoshnik behind the main line. An ad hoc battle group, led by Captain Walter Elflein, hit the Russian flank with a vicious counterattack. Hand-to-hand fighting occurred as the surprised Soviets tried to regroup to meet the threat. Elflein's men advanced without letup, using bayonets and hand grenades to keep the Russians at bay until a unit of the 24th Panzer arrived on the scene.

The panzers faced strong antitank fire from guns dragged forward by the Russian infantry. Soviet reinforcements were also being funneled into the area, making the elimination of the breakthrough force even harder for the Germans.

The villages were retaken on November 23, and the front line was once again restored. Severely wounded, Elflein was flown to a hospital in Krakow. Having already won the Ritterkreuz on October 10, 1943, Captain Elflein received the oak leaves to the award from Hitler's hand at the Führer's Berghof "Tea House" on May 31, 1944. His award was dated December 5, 1943—about two weeks after his almost suicidal counterattack.

After their failure, the Soviets switched to another sector of the 79th's front. Lt. Col. Fritz Müller's Grenadier Regiment 208 became the target of a strong frontal assault after the usual pounding from Red Army artillery. Aided by elements of the 24th Panzer and Assault Gun Detachment 277, Müller's men held firm. As the Russian attack increased in ferocity, a battalion

of Grenadier Regiment 570 from the neighboring 111th Division was also thrown into the line, blunting the Soviet assault.

On the morning of November 25, the Russians attacked again and were driven back. During the afternoon, however, Soviet forces managed to make a mile-and-a-half deep penetration at the junction of the front linking Müller's regiment with Grenadier Regiment 212. Fighting raged through the night and into the next day. Help from the 24th Panzer and German artillery finally made the difference, and by 0900 on the 26th the original front line was restored yet again.

Another Russian attack hit outpost positions of the 3rd Gebirgs Division. In the early morning, a large group of tanks

that it would be only a matter of time before the Soviets captured the area. It was a simple equation. Russian losses were replaced and German losses were not. Production had dropped to almost nothing as the precious refining and mining equipment was dismantled and shipped to other Hermann Göring Werke operations farther west.

With the ore output a nonissue, the correct military move would have been to abandon the bridgehead and fall back behind the Dnieper. Shortening the line would free up forces and form a much needed reserve of divisions that could be used to counter any Soviet attack. Von Manstein had been pushing for such a withdrawal for the past two weeks.

Adolf Hitler had other ideas. He became more obsessed with the idea of using the bridgehead as a springboard for an attack to free the divisions bottled up in the Crimea. Little thought was given to where divisions for such an attack would come from. Hitler had convinced himself that once the Russians attacking the bridgehead were shattered by the German defenses, von Manstein could slice through them, link up with the 17th Armee, and then regain the territory that had been lost during the previous two months.

On December 2, the Soviets hit the 79th Division again. Achieving a breach in the German line, Russian forces drove deep into the inner bridgehead. As they pushed forward toward the Dnieper they were met by several German "alarm units" that had been hastily sent to stop them.

**BY THE TIME THE
RUSSIANS REGAINED
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All: National Archives

supported by infantry hit the flank of 1st Lieutenant Horst Heinrich's 2nd Kompanie/Gebirgs Engineer Battalion 83. In the bitter fighting the Russians broke the line and drove to a depth of 1,000 feet, threatening to cut off the entire company.

Heinrich gathered members of his signal unit and led a counterattack that destroyed three enemy antitank guns. They then used flamethrowers to attack the Russian tanks, allowing the survivors of the company to retreat to the main line of defense some half mile away. Picking up stragglers along the way, Heinrich led 17 men back to the relative safety of the bridgehead defenses. By the time the Russians regained their momentum, the main line had been fully alerted and the attack was stopped by a hail of German fire.

By now it was clear to the engineers at the mines around Nikopol and Krivoi Rog

LEFT: Marshal Rodion Malinovsky commanded the Southwest Front of the Red Army. CENTER: Marshal Fedor Tolbukhin led the South Front of the Red Army during heavy fighting around Nikopol. RIGHT: German General Ferdinand Schörner defended the bridgehead at Zaporozhye.

Arriving piecemeal, the German units were ground up by the Russians. On December 3, the Alarm Company of Panzerjäger Regiment 656, commanded by Lieutenant Marec, was swept aside with most of its 194 men lost. Members of the staff of Engineer Battalion 179 and Panzerjäger Detachment 179 suffered the same fate as they fought from hastily prepared defenses.

Those sacrificed in slowing the Russians made it possible for a combat group from the 79th and another from the 3rd Gebirgs to move in and hit the Russian flanks. The Soviets were caught off guard by the German attack and were sent reeling back. What could have been a major setback for the bridgehead defenders was averted as the surviving Russian assault troops scurried eastward toward their own lines.

Casualties during the Soviet assaults had been high, and for the next two weeks the Russians conducted small probing attacks while their forces were replenished. One thing the Soviets still had enough of was artillery ammunition, and German positions both on the front and inside the bridgehead took a tremendous pummeling daily while the armor and infantry regrouped and were resupplied.

By December 19, the Soviets were ready to try it again. Mieth's IV Armee Korps received a drum fire artillery barrage as the Russians moved forward. Trenches collapsed, and men were buried alive or were blown to pieces as they tried to make it to

secondary defenses. Those who survived stared out of their shattered positions to see a vast wave of Russian tanks and infantry moving toward them.

The Soviets hit Mieth's Korps with seven or eight infantry divisions, three tank brigades, the IV Guards Mechanized Corps, and the XIX Independent Tank Corps. Incredibly, the Germans held out in most places, but the Russians managed to break through a section of Bleyer's 258th Division and then widen the breach, allowing tanks and infantry to gradually create a three-mile-deep pocket.

Alarm units from the 258th were augmented by elements of the 111th Division's Grenadier Regiment 50 as they battled to keep the Soviets from advancing. Antitank guns were shifted and brought into play while a "fire brigade" from the 24th Panzer moved toward the broken sector. As the opposing forces fought at near point-blank range, Soviet ground attack aircraft swooped down to strafe German positions.

To help counter the Soviet air superiority, Schörner ordered antiaircraft units to move closer to the combat area. He also scraped together additional ad hoc units to stop the Russian drive. Soldiers in the midst of the battle were amazed to see the general's Kübelwagen cross just behind the front line with Schörner encouraging the men to hold firm.

With the help of 24th Panzer, the Germans prevented the Russians from reaching the Dnieper. Artillery from the 111th and 258th blasted the Soviet infantry while the panzers, antitank guns, and infantry tank killer units turned the Soviet tanks into blazing infernos. For the next few days the Russians slowly gave ground. When the front line was finally restored, 81 Soviet tanks lay destroyed on the battlefield.

Between Christmas and New Year's Day the Red Air Force launched numerous bombing raids against the bridgehead front line to keep the Germans guessing about where the next major breakthrough would take place. On December 31, about 50 Russian tanks hit the 111th Division. A small breakthrough was sealed off, and the attackers retreated after inflicting only minor damage.

Meanwhile, events to the north were threatening to break the entire southern sector of the Eastern Front wide open. By the end of December, the 1st Ukrainian Front's 1st Tank Army was pushing along the road to Vinnitsa. Around Korsun, a sizable part of the First Panzerarmee was in danger of being encircled by the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts, while another encirclement threatened German forces around Kirovograd.

Von Manstein played a brilliant game of chess, sending his meager reserves racing here and there along the front to stop a catastrophic breakthrough. He had grown weary of begging Hitler for permission to withdraw to save threatened troops, and in a few cases he authorized withdrawals himself, presenting Hitler the facts after the action had already occurred.

At Nikopol, however, there would be no such covert withdrawal. With Schörner in command of the bridgehead, von Manstein knew it would be futile to even suggest circumventing the Führer's orders. Although Schörner was completely loyal to Hitler, even he would have been astounded at the fairy-tale world that was Hitler's headquarters. As his divisions lay battered and bleeding inside the bridgehead, a December 28 Führer conference found Army Chief of Staff General Kurt Zeitzler telling Hitler that most of the divisions inside the bridgehead, with the exception of the 258th, 294th and the 302nd, were rock solid.

Buoyed by reports such as that, Hitler became more fixated on keeping the bridgehead as a future attack position for a linkup with the Crimea. He continued to ignore von Manstein's pleas to give up positions on the Dnieper bend, which would have shortened the line, or to evacuate the Crimea, which would have freed an entire army to use in the main line. Instead, he preferred the status quo, arguing that the loss of the Crimea would have an adverse effect on the political front in Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey.

By the beginning of 1944, Stalin had become increasingly frustrated with the lack of success at Krivoi Rog and Nikopol. He demanded results from Malinovsky and Tol-

bukhin, and he wanted them soon. At Nikopol, Tolbukhin opted to cease his frontal attacks and to concentrate on the bridgehead's flanks. During the first few days of January, Maj. Gen. Kurt Rüdiger's 302nd Division, occupying the area around Novo Dneprovka, was the focus of several attacks from General Leliushenko's Third Guards Army. It seemed that Leliushenko's men were on the verge of turning Mieth's flank, but then Mother Nature intervened.

Constant changes in temperature, coupled with alternating rain and snow showers, brought an early onset of the *rasputitsa*, the Russian muddy season, throughout the western Ukraine. The effects of the thaw were immediate, and movement on both sides quickly ground to a halt.

On the Soviet side, Colonel N.A. Grylev wrote, "Rain and melting snow aggravated the difficulties. Rivers overflowed their banks. Roads and tracks became impracticable for vehicles, as was the terrain for infantry. These various factors had a considerable effect on our military activities, limiting the possibility of maneuver and hampering supplies of food, fuel and munitions."

Major General Nikolaus von Vormann, writing from the Krivoi Rog sector, echoed Grylev's words. "The *rasputitsa*," he wrote, "had set in astonishingly early; everywhere it is spring mud ... Worked on by the sun, the rain and the warm winds, the heavy black Ukraine earth turns into thick sticky mud during the day. There is not one metalled road in the country. On foot you sink down to your shins and after a few steps lose shoes and socks there. Wheeled vehicles stall and get stuck. Suction by the mud tore away the too-narrow tracks of our all-purpose vehicles. The only machines capable of making any headway were the tractors and the tanks, which rolled their way forward at a maximum speed of three miles an hour, but at a cost of tremendous strain on the engine and huge petrol consumption."

Stalin refused to accept excuses from Tolbukhin and Malinovsky. He wanted

the Dnieper bend at any cost. The liberation of the Ukraine was just as politically important to him as the retention of the area was to Hitler. Turkey would certainly distance itself from Germany once the Ukraine was in Soviet hands, and Hitler's allies in southeastern Europe would be threatened by powerful Red Army forces at their borders. Therefore, he kept pressure on the two front commanders to continue their attacks despite the horrific difficulties on the ground.

January 10, 1944, saw Sharokhin's Thirty-Seventh Army and General Vasili Vasilevich Glagolev's Forty-Sixth Army (3rd Ukrainian Front) smash into the LVII Panzerkorps in a bid to sever the rail line at Apostolovo. The following day, Tolbukhin launched Leliushenko's 3rd Guards Army and General Viacheslav Dmitrievich Tsvetaev's Fifth Shock Army against the IV and XVII Armeekorps with the objective of linking up with Malinovsky's forces.

Mieth's and Leliushenko's divisions were locked in bloody combat as the Soviets struggled to penetrate the German positions. Both sides knew a Russian success would threaten to encircle the left flank of the Sixth Armee, which would make the bridgehead untenable.

Artillery fire killed friend and foe alike as observers called in strikes almost on top of their own positions. As the Russians bent the German lines, Mieth's men fell back to their secondary positions. Mobile units of the 24th Panzer, stationed closer to the front because of the weather, proved their worth once again as they made their appearance at critical points during the battle. Suffering appalling casualties, the Soviets finally called off their attack on January 16 to receive replacements and regroup for the next assault.

The Russians continued to probe the German line while the bulk of their forces refitted. In one such probing action, the popular commander of the II/Panzer-grenadier Regiment 26/24th Panzer Division was severely wounded. Captain Georg Michael, known for his audacity and his fearlessness, was at the front with

his battalion when he received his eighth wound.

Michael had been awarded the Ritterkreuz while serving as a cavalryman in the 1940 French campaign. Leading a small reconnaissance unit, he captured more than 500 French and colonial troops through sheer bluff, convincing them that they were surrounded by superior forces. Seriously wounded near Stalingrad, he was flown out of the cauldron while his division was being annihilated. For his actions during the Stalingrad campaign, he became the 187th soldier of the Wehrmacht to receive the oak leaves decoration to his Ritterkreuz.

At Nikopol, Michael's luck finally ran out. Although he was flown to a hospital in Odessa, he died of his wounds on January 19. Within days of his death, the 24th Panzer received orders to leave the Nikopol bridgehead and move northeast to counter a Soviet armored thrust aimed at Uman. With the departure of the division, the bridgehead defenders knew that their days on the eastern bank of the Dnieper were numbered.

As the Soviets prepared for yet another assault, Schörner was making his own plans for the bridgehead. The Russian advances in the north, coupled with the loss of the 24th Panzer Division, had made holding the Nikopol position impractical. Even if Berlin could not see it, Schörner knew that the time was fast approaching when the bridgehead defenders would have to retreat to the western bank of the Dnieper or be annihilated.

When put in motion, the plan called for withdrawal to the Sigrid Line, with German divisions on the main front leapfrogging through those divisions already occupying the position. The Sigrid Line defenders would then perform the same maneuver through the Ursula Line and cross to the relative safety of the western bank, followed by the Ursula defenders. Artillery, already sighted, would cover the retreating Germans every step of the way.

The forces comprising the Sixth Armee, which included the Nikopol defenders, had suffered casualties during the past few months that had turned most divisions into nothing more than understrength regiments. In late January, Hollidt had 20 divisions under his command. They averaged a frontline strength of 2,500 men. After the transfer of

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the 24th Panzer to the Eighth Armee, his only reserve was the 9th Panzer Division, which had 13 serviceable tanks and was also severely understrength in artillery and infantry.

Between them, Malinovsky and Tolbukhin had a total of 51 rifle divisions, at least half of them at full strength. They also had two mechanized and two tank corps as well as six tank brigades and a massive amount of independent artillery units.

On January 30, the two Soviet fronts struck. At Krivoi Rog, Malinovsky used his Forty-Sixth and Eighth Guards Armies as a battering ram to pave the way for a breakthrough. For the moment, the front held, but this time the German commanders knew they could not halt a Soviet advance for long.

After a heavy bombardment, Malinovsky threw his Fifth Shock, Third Guards, and Twenty-Eighth Armies against the Nikopol bridgehead. Schörner, ever watchful, kept in close communication with his frontline commanders. Reports indicated that a strong Soviet assault force had breached the lines of the 97th Jäger and 9th Infanterie Divisions,

driving an eight-mile wedge pointing toward Bolshaya Lepatikha. For the next two days the Russians tried to make a final push to grab the precious pontoon bridges located near the town.

By February 2, Schörner had had enough. At command posts throughout the bridgehead, radio operators received the message “Ladies, excuse Me”—the code to begin evacuation. Upon receipt of the signal the 3rd Gebirgs Division, which was wedged between the 17th and 302nd Divisions, began to fall back while the neighboring divisions extended their flanks to cover the narrow front left by its departure. Because it held such a narrow front the division was able to cross the Dnieper in good order and cover Schörner’s flank west of Grushevka, which was experiencing heavy attacks from

During a lull in the fighting on the steppes of Russia, a pair of German soldiers smoke a cigarette and eat a quick meal at their somewhat exposed position.



Chuikov’s Eighth Guards Army. The Seventeenth soon followed, taking up positions near Maryinskoye.

With Schörner’s withdrawal already under way, Sixth Armee headquarters gave approval for the evacuation on February 4. Hollidt had made the case to Berlin, noting the potential for encirclement of Gruppe Schörner if the Russians broke through the Apostolovo sector—something that seemed imminent. Finally, even Hitler saw the impossibility of holding the bridgehead, although he did mention that he would like to see a small bridgehead maintained around Bolshaya Lepatikha, which proved impossible.

By the time Sixth Armee approved the evacuation, the other divisions of Mieth’s Armee-korps had completed falling back to the Sigrid Line while Brandenburger’s three divisions did the same in the southern sector of the bridgehead. The Soviets pursued, taking heavy casualties in the process from the presighted German artillery. As more troops crossed to the west bank of the Dnieper, the remaining German forces inside the bridgehead retreated to the Ursula Line.

As his divisions crossed the river, Schörner was in the thick of things, shouting orders and making certain that all who could, made it across. At one point he was seen taking charge of an antiaircraft gun, directing fire on the pursuing Russians. The evacuation was successful, but it was only the beginning of a longer retreat.

Pressure in the north from General Ivan Timofeevich Schlemm’s Sixth Army made further defense of the Nikopol arc impossible. As the battered German divisions retreated, part of an overall withdrawal from the Dnieper bend, Soviet troops finally entered Nikopol on February 7.

Marching westward, Red Army battalions passed the hulking wreckage of the Hermann Göring Werke. The massive complex that symbolized the military and industrial might of the Third Reich in the southern Ukraine was now just a smoldering shell. In little more than two years, Hitler’s capital of Berlin would look the same. □



The Germans believed they had an impregnable position on the Taman Peninsula, but the persistent Soviet Army forced their retreat and eventual evacuation. Painting by German war artist Josef Jurutka.



BY VICTOR KAMENIR

BREACHING THE BLUE LINE

The Soviet Army liberated the Taman Peninsula during a month of hard fighting in the autumn of 1943.

While waiting for their opportunity to materialize, the Germans turned the Taman Peninsula into a seemingly impregnable position. The Seventeenth Field Army, under General of Engineers Erwin Jaeneke, occupied the line in the vicinity of Torres Verdes. To the Soviets, these defensive positions became known as the “Blue Line.”

The Seventeenth Army was composed of the V and XLIV Infantry Corps, XLIX Mountain Corps, and the V Romanian Cavalry Corps, a total strength of 18 divisions and four separate regiments. The Seventeenth was one of the strongest German field armies, numbering approximately 400,000 men, 2,860 cannon and mortars, more than 100 tanks and assault guns, and 300 combat aircraft.

The landscape of the Taman Peninsula was ideally suited for defensive operations against an enemy attacking from the east. Its northern flank is anchored on the shore of the Azov Sea, east of Kurchanski Bay. It continues through a series of inlets and then follows the Kurka River south, branching off from the Kuban River. Along the roughly 35 miles that the Blue Line followed the line of the Kurka River, the Germans built a high earthen berm on the western side of the river. After crossing the Kuban River, the Blue Line briefly followed the Adagum River, a tributary of the Kuban. There the position was anchored on strongly fortified Kievskaya village. This northern sector of German defenses was fronted by a wide swath of rivers, marshes, and flooded lowlands, making frontal attack practically impossible.

The central sector of the Blue Line, approximately 20 miles long, was characterized by a low plateau, easily accessible by Soviet tanks. Therefore, the Germans paid particular attention to fortifying this region. The defensive network here consisted of two heavily fortified lines anchored on villages and low hillocks. In front of each defensive line and in the empty spaces between strongpoints, there were extensive barbed wire emplacements, minefields, and concrete bunkers bristling with guns.

The southern sector of the Blue Line ran along 15 miles of difficult mountainous terrain, terminating at the large port city of Novorossiysk located at Tsemess Bay on the Black Sea. The Germans turned whole districts of the city into miniature fortresses. Many streets were barricaded. A network of interconnected basements fortified with concrete, bricks, and timber was set up to establish in-depth defensive zones. German combat engineers blew up many buildings and built bunkers in the rubble, reminiscent of Stalingrad. The streets and the suburbs were extensively mined as well.

Fifteen to 20 miles behind the forward defensive line were multiple defensive positions, prepared with maximum utilization of advantageous terrain and narrow avenues of approach. These shorter defensive lines were given names such as Bucharest, Berlin, Munich, Breslau, Stuttgart, and Ulm. The most forward of them, running from the city of Temryuk on

the Azov Sea coast southwest to the Black Sea coast and then west along it, was called the Little Gothic Line (Kleine Gotten Stellung).

Early in February 1943, the Soviet forces launched a general offensive to liberate the Kuban region. After several months of fighting, the Soviet Army advanced almost 400 miles before finally grinding to a halt at the Blue Line. The difficult nature of the terrain limited Soviet maneuverability, and combat actions degenerated into a costly process of pushing the Germans out rather than surrounding and destroying them.

The retreating German forces systematically destroyed bridges and railroads, collapsed wells and mined roads, using every means available to slow down the Soviet pursuit. As the Germans retreated west, their defensive lines became shorter, allowing them to create local reserves and utilize internal lines of communication. In turn, the Soviet front lines became wider, decreasing troop density.

On February 4, a small force of Soviet soldiers and sailors from the Eighteenth Army landed in the immediate vicinity of Novorossiysk and established a beachhead. Despite determined German efforts to liquidate this threat, the Soviets stubbornly hung on and slowly expanded the beachhead. By the time the general offensive ground to a halt in the first week of June 1943, the Soviet beachhead was an impregnable network of trenches and bunkers.

This small sliver of shoreline became known as the “Little Land” in the Soviet Union. In this campaign, future Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev served as the chief political officer of the Eighteenth Army. Long after the war, Brezhnev authored a book called *The Little Land*, depicting the seven-month campaign on the beachhead. In his book, Brezhnev claimed to have been present on the Little Land on several occasions and in the thick of the fighting.



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This book raised a large amount of controversy, which lasted for years. Many Soviet veterans claimed that Brezhnev never got any closer to the Little Land than the opposite shore of Tsemess Bay. However, until the fall of communist rule in the Soviet Union, it was unhealthy to voice this point of view.

While both the Germans and the Soviets took advantage of a lull in the fighting, the Soviet high command began planning a new offensive to completely clear the Taman Peninsula of German forces.

The military council of the North Caucasus front, headed by Col. Gen. I.E. Petrov, made the decision to launch the new offensive in the south against Novorossiysk. The terrain in the north of the peninsula was simply too forbidding to allow any maneuver by large forces, and the center of the Blue Line was too strongly fortified. Neither Petrov nor any of his subordinates had any illusions that Novorossiysk would be an easy nut to crack. One major factor in deciding to move against Novorossiysk was the assistance of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet with its ability to move along the southern coast of the peninsula and provide the advancing Soviet Army forces with naval gunfire.

The Soviet North Caucasus front was composed of four land armies (the Ninth, Eighteenth, Fifty-Sixth, and Fifty-Eighth), and one air army, the Fourth. The Fifty-Eighth Army was assigned to defend the shores of the Azov Sea. The other ground armies, composed of 20 infantry divisions and four naval infantry brigades, would directly participate in the attack against the Taman Peninsula. The Eighteenth Army, under Lt. Gen. K.N. Leselidze, was assigned the all-important task of liberating Novorossiysk. The Ninth Army, under Lt. Gen. Alexey A. Grechkin, was operating in the north, and the Fifty-Sixth Army, under Lt. Gen. Andrey A. Grechko, was given the central sector.

During this stage of the war, while the Soviet Air Force did not have complete air superiority, its numerical advantage over the German combat aircraft in the vicinity was daunting. Opposing the 300 German aircraft on the Taman Peninsula, the Soviet Fourth Air Army and the air assets of the Black Sea Fleet amassed more than 1,000 planes.

Fighting among the Fourth Air Army was the famed 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment. Every single person in this unit, from cook to mechanic to pilot, was a woman, usually barely into her 20s. Flying old plywood and canvas PO-2 trainer biplanes converted into night bombers, the Soviet female fliers proudly wore the nickname “Night Witches” given to them by Germans.

The Soviet female pilots fully earned the coveted and honored “Guards” designation, paying their dues in blood. Their sacrifices were epitomized by one harrowing night mission when the slow-moving biplanes were ambushed by a German night fighter. Four Soviet aircraft were sent burning to the ground, taking eight young women fliers to their fiery deaths.

As if having a premonition of events to come, Hitler on September 3 allowed Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group South, to begin the evacuation of the Taman Peninsula. The next day the orders were relayed to the Seventeenth Army, which now had only a few days to begin an orderly evacuation. Originally, the German



ABOVE: In September 1944, Red Army soldiers waded through a marshy area during a patrol. Such terrain played an important role on the Taman Peninsula as both armies had to contend with mobility issues. **OPPOSITE:** Mounted on ket-tenkrad caterpillar-powered motorcycles, German soldiers fall back along a dirt road in the Caucasus. After giving up the Taman Peninsula, the Germans attempted to minimize their losses during the retreat.

commanders allocated eight weeks for the total evacuation of their forces from the Taman Peninsula. Coming events were to cut that time in half.

The Soviet offensive began at 2 AM on September 10, 1943. Under cover of massive artillery barrages from more than 200 cannon and air strikes by 150 combat aircraft, several small detachments of Soviet torpedo boats raced into the port of Novorossiysk and fired their torpedoes directly at jetties and German positions on the piers. Immediately following them, a small flotilla of cutters began disembarking three battalion-sized assault parties.

At 3:15 AM, the main forces of the Eighteenth Army went on the offensive from two separate directions. The western group attacked from the Myskhako beachhead on the western side of Tsemess Bay.

The eastern group went into action over the rugged mountainous terrain north of Novorossiysk. By now, the German and Romanian defenders were putting up a very strong defense, and the Soviet units could not make significant progress.

Throughout September 10, the Germans rushed reinforcements to the contested areas of Novorossiysk. Two of the Soviet assault groups, composed of naval infantrymen and NKVD (Soviet secret police), were fragmented and largely destroyed. Only the third group, consisting of men from the 1339th Rifle Regiment, hung onto their minor gains. It was reinforced by its sister, the 1337th Rifle Regiment, and by troops from the 318th Rifle Division during the night of September 11.

By then, the 1339th Regiment was in dire straits. The jetties and piers were recaptured by the Germans. They closed the ring around the 1339th, and the 1337th had to fight ashore. Fortunately for them, the Germans did not have time to reestablish strong defenses and the 1st Battalion of the 1337th Regiment soon linked up with the men from the 1339th.

Attacking in the early morning of September 11, the eastern group of forces of the Soviet Eighteenth Army, reinforced with tanks, broke through German defenses in the vicinity of the October Cement Factory by 6 AM. This allowed them to link up with the 1337th and 1339th Regiments that were advancing toward them.

At 7 AM on the same day, the Soviet Ninth Army went onto its own offensive in the northern sector of the Blue Line. Limited to narrow lanes of attack, the units of the Ninth Army were not able to breach the German defenses. Still, its offensive tied down German reserves in the north and prevented them from being shifted south against the Eighteenth Army.

The Soviet Fifty-Sixth Army, deployed against the central sector of the Blue Line, conducted only limited probing attacks during September 11-13.

While the battle for Taman swung into high gear, the German Seventeenth Army began an orderly, if somewhat hurried,



ABOVE: Hastily bandaged, a wounded Red Army soldier is helped along by a comrade during the effort to liberate the village of Taman. With the Soviet capture of the town, German and Romanian troops were placed in a precarious position. **OPPOSITE:** A coordinated month-long Soviet Army offensive along the coast of the Black Sea liberated the Taman Peninsula from the Germans. The locations of Soviet land and seaborne thrusts are visible in the above map.

evacuation of the peninsula. German naval vessels were making shuttle runs from the towns of Anapa, Temryuk, and Taman to the city of Kerch on the eastern side of the Crimean Peninsula. Soviet aircraft harassed German vessels across the Kerch Straits, but the majority of the Soviet planes were busy supporting the ground forces, and the German evacuation was conducted with minimal losses in naval craft.

Throughout September 12-13, the Soviet command continued feeding reserves into the Eighteenth Army's area of operations, including a division-sized tank force. In contrast, the Germans defenses, lacking further significant reserves, began showing signs of weakening.

Advancing along the northern rim of the Tsemess Bay from the October Cement Factory, the forward units of the Eighteenth Army ran into determined German resistance in Mefodievski, a northern suburb of Novorossiysk. Fighting from well-prepared positions, German defenders took heavy toll on attacking Soviet Army infantrymen. When the Soviet gunners attempted to manhandle their cannons into direct fire positions, accurate German fire caused heavy casualties among Soviet Army gun crews.

Finally, Soviet tanks and self-propelled artillery swung the balance in their favor. Methodically, the Soviet armor reduced the German strongholds to rubble and the Soviet infantrymen hunted down the German survivors among the ruins.

The German defenders put up a particularly strong fight around a large bunker complex dubbed the "Red House." The Germans hung on for two days, subjected to point-blank fire from Soviet tanks and self-propelled artillery. The Soviets had to first reduce outlying positions in neighboring buildings before starting on the Red House proper.

At first, the Soviet cannon systematically suppressed the German heavy weapons on the lower floors. The Soviet Army infantry cleared the lower floors of the building, providing cover for their combat engineers, placing explosive charges around the main bunker. The collapse of the Red House signified the end of German resistance in Mefodievski, and by September 13 Soviet forces were in firm control of the suburb.

On the following day came the Fifty-Sixth Army's turn to assume the offensive. After a heavy artillery barrage at 7 AM, it had the unenviable task of frontally assaulting heavily fortified and capably defended German positions. The Soviet tanks steadily advanced

in the face of direct German artillery fire. They were halted just short of German forward trenches protected by extensive minefields. While the Soviet tanks traded fire with German antitank artillery, the Soviet combat engineers cleared a narrow passage in a minefield. Several tanks immediately charged through. However, just as the valiant Soviet machines exited the minefield, they were knocked out by German artillery and set on fire. The Soviet infantry was cut off from its armor early in the attack and could not make any headway.

The fighting renewed in earnest with the dawning of September 15. After a day of grinding fighting, the Soviet armor breached the forward German trenches. Soviet infantry, which this time was able to stay close to its tanks, steadily cleared the first trench line.

The Eighteenth Army was attacking on that day as well. Its western section, attacking from the Cape Myskhako area, achieved minor gains, pushing the Germans back approximately two kilometers. On the other hand, the eastern group, reinforced with tanks, captured the area of Sugar Head Mountain, opening the way into the city of Novorossiysk.

Parts of the German 4th Mountain Division defending the city were partially cut off, and the whole division was threatened with being encircled. It began falling back in the afternoon, hard-pressed by the jubilant Soviet Army. Late on September 16, the city of Novorossiysk was liberated by the Soviet Army and the Black Sea Fleet. As the German forces began withdrawing from the city, the Red Army advanced close on their heels, attempting to cut off and destroy straggling German units. A Soviet tank brigade positioned itself north of the city, ready to begin rolling up the German right flank the next day. Soviet partisan detachments, operating mainly in the forested terrain in the southwest of the peninsula, began attacking retreating German units, attempting to delay them and create panic.

As the Soviets continued pressing westward, they began running into well-prepared German defensive lines anchored on lagoons, marshes, and other difficult terrain. The German and Romanian soldiers of the Seventeenth Army put up a tenacious defense around Wolf's Gate Pass. The Soviet offensive was slowed for two days as they had to overcome extensive defensive works placed along steep ravines. Romanian mountain infantrymen and dismounted cavalrymen gave particularly good accounts of themselves.

On September 20, Soviet tanks from the Eighteenth Army reached the small town of Anapa on the coast. The Black Sea Fleet aided the ground forces by providing extensive naval gunfire support and by landing assault parties behind German lines. On the morning of September 21, the Soviet soldiers broke into Anapa, clearing it of German defenders by nightfall. The Fifty-Sixth Army continued pressing frontally and

attempting flanking attacks, often bringing infantry right up to the firing lines in trucks.

All the while, the Black Sea Fleet was landing small parties along the coast to cut the narrow roads running between lagoons and marshes. After nightfall on September 25, a larger assault force of almost 8,500 men with artillery and mortars landed near Salt Lake. Its mission was to capture the city of Taman, after which the whole peninsula was named, and to cut off German avenues of retreat. The next day, supported by two regiments of combat aircraft from the Black Sea Fleet, the Soviets battled for Taman. They were not able to break through for several days.

At the same time, the Ninth Army was steadily advancing on Temryuk. This town, situated on the south shore of the Azov Sea, was a key link in German shipping between the Taman Peninsula and Crimea. Soggy

METHODICALLY, THE SOVIET ARMOR REDUCED THE GERMAN STRONGHOLDS TO RUBBLE AND THE SOVIET INFANTRYMEN HUNTED DOWN THE GERMAN SURVIVORS AMONG THE RUINS.



ground prevented the Soviet forces from using tanks and bringing up heavy artillery. The majority of the fighting was conducted by small groups of infantrymen, fighting in a nightmarish network of marshes and lagoons studded with minefields, wire emplacements, and bunkers. To overcome the problem of moving through the chest-high water, Soviet forces used large numbers of small, flat-bottomed boats. One field-expedient solution was the use of inflated inner tubes worn by individual men as they moved through the marshes.

Again, the Soviet forces resorted to tactical naval landings behind German lines. Before dawn on September 25, more than 1,600 Soviet Army and Navy men landed in two places west of Temryuk. They were supported by cutters from the Azov Sea Flotilla and the Soviet Fourth Air Army. Simultaneously, the main forces of the Ninth Army attacked from the east. After two days of heavy fighting, Temryuk fell on September 27.

While the fighting raged on land, the Germans continued evacuating their personnel and equipment from the Taman Peninsula. Strangely, they were almost unhindered by the Soviet Air Force. Instrumental in this evacuation effort was the German 3rd Minesweeping Flotilla. This flotilla was moved to the region in 1942 from the Baltic Sea. The monumental task of moving a whole flotilla overland involved the use of special 64-wheeled transports.

By the time the last German and Romanian soldiers pulled out of the Taman Peninsula on October 9, the 3rd Minesweeping Flotilla, aided by locally procured transports, had ferried more than 255,000 Axis soldiers, 21,000 vehicles, 1,800 guns, and 74,000 horses to temporary safety. Significant amounts of war materiel and other supplies were moved out as well.

The last Axis units to leave the Taman Peninsula were the German 97th Light and 4th Mountain Divisions from the XLIX Mountain Corps. German heavy artillery placed on the Crimean Peninsula covered the pullback of the rear guard by firing heavy barrages across the Kerch Straits. General Rudolf Konrad, commander of the



Red Army soldiers take cover behind a mound of debris during their pursuit of retreating German troops after liberating the Taman Peninsula. The victory on the Taman Peninsula was a costly affair for the Soviets during the autumn of 1943.

XLIX Mountain Corps, and General Jaeneke were among the last men to evacuate.

In 1977, a movie called *Cross of Iron* premiered. It starred James Coburn as the battle-hardened German Sergeant Steiner. Coburn's character was pitted against an overzealous Captain Stransky, played by Maximilian Schell, who was out to win the highest German decoration, the Iron Cross, at all costs. This film portrayed the events of the fighting on the Taman Peninsula. Several scenes show the extensive German defensive positions and the close-in nature of fighting that developed there.

The tough fighting throughout the Taman Peninsula was exemplified by an interesting feature not often seen on the Eastern Front: minimal involvement of armored forces on both sides. Difficult terrain precluded the Soviet Army from the extensive use of heavy combat vehicles, and combat operations mainly involved infantry supported by massed artillery and air attacks.

The sailors and vessels of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and Azov Sea Flotilla proved invaluable in liberating the Taman Peninsula. Continuous amphibious landings behind German lines kept the defenders off balance. The Soviet doctrine of combined arms utilization was coming to maturity.

After the Taman operation was over, both sides could tally up successes and shortcomings. While the Soviet forces liberated a significant portion of their territory and eliminated the possibility of future German operations against the Trans-Caucasian oil fields, they failed to trap and eliminate the German Seventeenth Army.

In turn, while losing the strategically important territory, the Wehrmacht preserved the combat capability of the Seventeenth Army and prevented large stocks of supplies from falling into Soviet hands. Even before the operation was over, Hitler recognized the accomplishments of his soldiers who served on the Taman Peninsula from February 1 to October 9, 1943, by authorizing the wearing of the "Kuban Shield" shoulder patch.

German commanders placed their casualties during the Taman operation of September 10 to October 9, 1943, at more than 10,000 killed, including four division commanders, 36,000 wounded, and 3,500 missing in action. Romanian casualties were placed at 1,600 killed, 7,200 wounded, and 800 missing. Various sources estimate total Soviet casualties around 114,000 men, including more than 40,000 killed.

Neither side lacked valor. In the words of James Coburn's Sergeant Steiner, the Taman Peninsula was the place "where the Iron Crosses grow." □

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The Spanish Blue Division fought alongside the Germans on the Eastern Front.

TO THEIR RUSSIAN ENEMIES they were the “Spanish mercenaries of Hitler’s Fascist lackey, Franco.” To Hitler himself, “One can’t imagine more fearless fellows. They scarcely take cover. They flout death.” Officially the 250th Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht, it was commonly called the *Division Azul*, Blue Division, after the color of Spain’s Falangist (Fascist) Party. As Spain was neither combatant nor conquered, the volunteers who fought in it were probably World War II’s most purely ideologically motivated soldiers.

The announcement on June 28, 1941, by the regime of Caudillo Francisco Franco that a division of volunteers would be recruited to join Hitler’s six-day-old invasion of Russia set off a wave of virtual hysteria across Spain. While some mobs stoned the British embassy, others stampeded recruiting offices in such numbers that many met their quota in a day and within in

the week they had signed up enough to form several divisions.

The entire cadet corps of Spain’s equivalent of West Point volunteered, as did 3,000 students from the University of Madrid. While the senior command was unenthusiastic, many officers offered to be demoted or even enlist as privates. Of the first 18,694 who entrained for Germany on July 17, 1941, 70 percent, including every officer from captain on up, were from the regular army, and most of the rest were Spanish Civil War veterans.

As Gerald R. Kleinfeld and Lewis A. Tambs wrote in *Hitler’s Spanish Legion*, “for many of the young Spaniards who volunteered, the Russo-German War was a continuation of their own Civil War of 1936-1939—a crusade against Communism.” Those who sent them had their own more subversive and politically (as opposed to ideologically) motivated reasons.

The most pro-Nazi members of the Fascist regime, led by foreign minister and brother-in-law of Franco, Ramon Serrano Suner, pressed for an outright declaration of war against Russia, seeing it as a stepping stone for joining Hitler against Britain and seizing Gibraltar. However, the ever-cautious Franco, whose vehement hatred of Communism always took a back seat to his own political survival, had his own personal agenda. For nine hours the previous October he had patiently listened to, then rebutted, Hitler’s blandishments to enter the war. Hitler would later groan that he would rather have teeth pulled than try again. For Franco, the Blue Division was a way to keep his hand in should Hitler win the war, while holding off the Nazi dictator at least temporarily and satisfying his most extreme elements at home.

While training in Bavaria, the Spaniards drew harsh criticism from Germans for their sloppy dress and failure to salute. In Russia, they continued to draw the ire of the Germans for their disdaining to properly maintain weapons or dig effec-



ABOVE: In this painting by German war artist R. Hanzl, a Spanish mortar crew, equipped and uniformed by the Germans, fires on a Russian town. INSET: General August Munos Grandes commanded the Spanish Blue Division.

Both images: National Museum of the U.S. Army, Army Art Collection

tive fortifications. Hitler even complained: “They regarded a rifle as an instrument that should not be cleaned under any pretext.”

The Spanish for their part showed their contempt for an order against fraternization with women by parading before German officers with inflated condoms on their rifle barrels, and some Russians who observed this spectacle reported it as possible use of poison gas balloons. Since they received all their supplies from the Germans, the Spanish would soon have more substantial and serious causes for complaint. A German diet that spread gastritis and a last-in-line priority for winter clothing forced the Spaniards to share one overcoat among a number of men. By Christmas, over 700 men had been disabled by frostbite, more than had been killed in action.

To reach the front, the Blue Division made the longest sustained marching effort of World War II—45 days. From August 29 to October 9, 1941, they trudged from Sulvaki, Poland, to Vitebsk, Russia, almost 625 miles, in a column stretching 20 miles, each man lugging 70 pounds of equipment. The division saw its first action just 24 hours after being moved into the line and would soon be engulfed in a military maelstrom.

On November 8, one battalion occupied the villages of Posselok, Possad, and Oten-ski in a line stretching 25 miles along the east bank of the Volkhov River. Four days later, before dawn, the first furious Russian assaults along the line began. Within hours, Posselok was in flames and the 40 Spanish survivors of the company there had fled to Possad.

Kleinfeld and Tambs wrote that they found the village “a living hell!...Bodies with the young faces of university students were stacked like cordwood at the CP (command post).”

By early December, the division commander, General August Munos Grandes, who had so bombastically ordered his men to “defend Possad as if it were Spain ... share the glory and the danger,” was now despairing, “All the men in Possad and Oten-ski are dead, sacrificed to



ABOVE: Advancing eastward, horse-drawn wagons of the Spanish Blue Division cross a checkpoint on the border between Poland and Germany. **BELOW:** Experiencing the harshness of their first Russian winter, and short of proper attire, the Blue Division utilize white sheets as a means of camouflage.



Both: National Archives

bombs, shells tanks, and crushing enemy infantry attacks.”

On December 7, a withdrawal was ordered prior to securing German authorization. The Spanish crossed over the frozen Volkhov under cover of darkness so stealthily that the Russians bombed and shelled the vacated positions for hours. A spotter who didn't get the word and an infantryman who slept through it had to walk out on their own. The stand along the Volkhov had cost the division 120 killed and 440 wounded.

The Division served along the Leningrad sector, enduring the hardships and experiencing the horrors that made the Eastern Front the most dreaded of World War II. In winter, food had to be sliced with axes and

temperatures of 12 degrees below zero were considered mild weather. In springtime, the men were tormented by hordes of mosquitoes from the surrounding swamps and by the stench of thousands of bodies frozen stiff during the winter and now thawing and decomposing.

The Spaniards were shocked by the horrors of war in the East. One soldier of the Blue Division saw a comrade impaled to the ground by an incoming Russian shell. Spaniards who retook positions previously abandoned to the Germans found wounded they had left behind with their chests torn open with picks. In turn, volunteers from Spain's vicious version of the French Foreign Legion sliced off the ears, noses and fingers of Russian prisoners, then sent them stumbling back to their lines.

Of its 21 major battles and hundreds of smaller engagements, three actions of the Spanish Blue Division would epitomize the savagery of the Russian Front in World War II and become legendary. These include the endurance trek of its ski company from January 10-21, 1942, the stand of the El Segunda Battalion at Poselok, January 22-28, 1943, and the desperate battle at Krasny Bor on February 10, 1943.

Ordered to relieve 543 Germans cut off south of Lake Ilmen, the ski company started out in temperatures of minus 40 degrees. The temperature plunged even further to minus 56 degrees as the company struggled through winds, knee- and sometimes waist deep snow and icy water, and zigzagged around crevasses. After crossing the frozen lake, the company still had to fight its way past Russian ski troops and tanks. By the times the Spanish contingent reached its destination and brought out the Germans, only 12 of its original 206 men had not been killed, wounded, or disabled. The ski company had suffered an incredible 95 percent loss!

The El Segunda Battalion was equally and brutally decimated defending Poselok. It had needed 20 trucks to be transported to the front. When it was relieved after almost a week under incessant Russian shellfire, only Lieutenant Francisco Soriano, seven sergeants, and 20 men had survived.

One soldier who did not come back was Captain Salvador Massip. Hit in the left eye, ooze freezing as it ran down his cheek, then hit in the right leg, he rejected pleas by his men to be carried to safety as he dragged himself along the line directing machine-gun fire at the oncoming Russians. In the end, he pulled himself to his feet to face the enemy and was cut down as he was throwing his last grenade. He was awarded the Laureate Cross of St. Ferdinand, Spain's version of the Medal of Honor or Victoria Cross.

Warned by the Germans of the impending Russian assault at Krasny Bor, 20 miles east of Leningrad, a Spanish officer told his men, "Tomorrow the bulls will run." At 6:45 AM, the Spaniards were, in the words of the Russians' official Leningrad war diary, "stunned by a squall of explosions," as artillery shells, mortar rounds and katyusha rockets fired from 800 Russian.

Bunkers were demolished and trenches caved in. "Where snow had lain, the fierce heat had laid bare the scarred grass and a moment later grass and topsoil as well disappeared. A landscape like the mountains of the moon was created," recalled one survivor. To another, it was an "absolute inferno."

The next storm broke as almost 100 Russian tanks and thousands of soldiers charged. Twelve hours of pure chaos and carnage followed. The Spaniards called artillery fire down on themselves as they were being overrun. Members of the headquarters staff armed themselves, charged singing the Falangist anthem *Face to the Sun*, and were wiped out. Russian tanks fired point-blank into the clearly marked field hospital and at fleeing ambulances until driven back with Molotov cocktails.

Corporal Antonio Ponte blew a Russian tank up along with himself. Captain Manuel Ruiz de Huidrobo had turned down leave to visit his wife and newborn son to remain with his men and went down emptying his pistol into Russians swamping his trench. Both were awarded Laureate Crosses.

The Spaniards were finally ordered south to form a new line, where they held against further attacks for five days. On Black Wednesday, as Krasny Bor came to be

National Archives



During the fighting at Volkhov, the German Army's only efficient means of transporting supplies and evacuating casualties, was via horsepower.

called, 75 percent of the Spaniards who fought were killed or wounded, a staggering 3,645 casualties among the total complement of 5,608 soldiers.

In addition to the troops on the ground, five Spanish fighter squadrons were rotated in and out of action. Flying Me-109s and Focke-Wulf FW-190 fighter aircraft, they shot down 156 Russian aircraft while losing 21 pilots killed and one shot down and captured.

In the meantime, ruthless diplomatic and political infighting were raging in Berlin and Madrid. Munoz Grandes told Hitler he wanted to take over the government of Spain, declaring, "I am prepared to stake everything, even myself, for friendship with Germany. My driving force is hatred for Britain, which has oppressed my country for centuries." Hitler, not surprisingly, encouraged him. In Madrid, the German military attaché met with another Spanish general about a possible coup. German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop proposed a characteristically harebrained scheme to force Franco from power by bombing Madrid.

Allied diplomats, for their part, were pressuring Franco to stop trading with Germany and to withdraw Spanish forces from Russia with threats of oil and food embargoes and the successful invasion of North Africa to put teeth into them. The U.S. Ambassador went further, reminding Franco, "What would happen if Russia declared war on Spain? Russia is an ally of the United States and Britain." Franco finally sacked Foreign Minister Serrano

Suner, purged pro-Nazis from his regime, and recalled Munoz Grandes, giving him a hero's return, decorating him, and then shelving him.

With the war's tide plainly turning against Hitler and the numbers of Spanish men volunteering for service drying up, Franco decided on September 25, 1943, to withdraw the Blue Division. A week later, he publicly affirmed Spanish neutrality. The Blue Division, in contrast to the cheers it went off to, returned in near silence. Cautious as ever, Franco chose not to irritate Hitler any further by drawing much public attention to the pullout.

Of the 47,000 Spanish men who served in the Blue Division, 22,000, or 47 percent, became casualties. A year after their return, Franco was writing them off, making the amazing remark to an American journalist that sending the Blue Division to Russia "implied no idea of conquest or passion against any country." He added, "When the Spanish government realized that the presence of these volunteers could effect its relations with those Allied countries with which it had friendly relations, it took the necessary steps to make those volunteers return home."

A Volunteer Legion, inevitably called the Blue Legion, of 2,133 stay-behind, diehard Spanish Fascists fought on until it was recalled on March 21, 1944. Some 250 Spanish Fascists joined the Waffen SS and went down fighting around the Reich Chancellery in Berlin in 1945. Their leader, SS Colonel and former Blue Division captain Miguel Ezquerra, was taken prisoner but managed to escape and return to Spain.

Ezquerra was more fortunate than 330 other Spaniards, 300 of them captured at Krasny Bor, and held in Soviet prisons and labor camps from Odessa to Siberia. Ninety-four of these died before the remainder were returned to Spain on April 1, 1954. For all their suffering, they were, in their turn, luckier than the almost 5,000 of their Blue Divisions comrades who "flouted death" and lost.

Author John W. Osborn, Jr., is a contributor to WWII History who writes from his home in Laguna Niguel, California.

From the Publishers of WWII QUARTERLY Magazine

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